PS4 + XBOX ONE REVIEWS SPECIAL

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SONY'S SECRET WEAPON
VITA TV REVIEWED

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REVEALED: THE WINNERS OF 2013

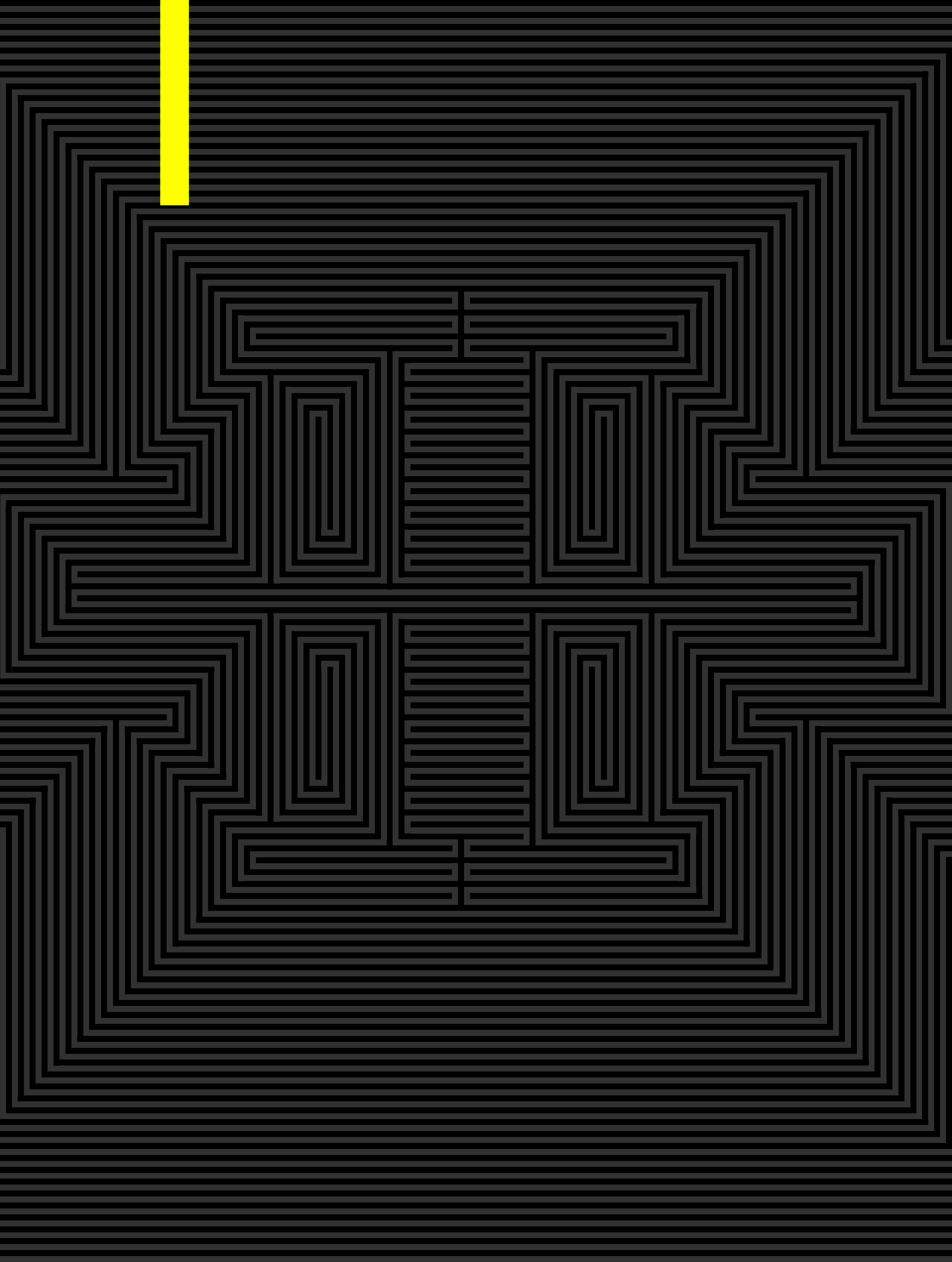
DARK SOULS II

ALL HAIL THE LAST GREAT ADVENTURE OF THE PS3/360 GENERATION

QUANTUM BREAK
INSIDE THE BIZARRE GAME/TV FUSION FROM THE CREATORS OF ALAN WAKE

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CRIMSON DRAGON
RESOGUN

#262
JANUARY 2014



We're here to play games, if that's OK with everyone



Here at **Edge**, we love PCs. We love mobile phones. We love tablet devices. Show us anything capable of running a videogame, in fact, and we'll get on board. What we love most, though, aren't electronic devices that are merely compatible with videogames, but those that are *made* for them. Machines that exist for the purpose of entertaining us, interactively, before anything else.

A dedicated console game has a kind of purity. It doesn't have to get its bearings, to wrestle with how it should present itself for any one of a million different hardware configurations. It is optimised to work on a fixed canvas, so it behaves the same way on one console as it does on another, and everyone interacts with it using the same tools. More than anything, in playing a dedicated console game it feels like we're experiencing nothing other than the definitive version of its creators' vision.

When 3DO's Interactive Multiplayer console launched in 1993, boasting compatibility with Kodak Photo CDs alongside its ability to play games, it was a sign of things to come. Game consoles, with their shiny new optical drives, became multimedia machines. And who could deny the appeal of being able to play audio CDs on a PS1 or DVD movies on a PS2? Importantly, though, this functionality was never included to the detriment of the hardware's ability to play games; it was only ever a bonus. And that's why Microsoft's Xbox One design, which ringfences some of its resources for broader functionality, thereby compromising its capabilities as a game console, is frustrating.

It's also why it was particularly good news that Sony's PS4 – a console designed with playing games at the core of its agenda – broke sales records when it launched in November. It is what we need during a period when too many industry watchers have been calling time on the dedicated game console, claiming that the future belongs only to multipurpose devices such as tablets. We assess the arrivals of both PS4 and Xbox One in Knowledge.

And in our cover story, we visit the offices of FromSoftware. If anyone gets it when it comes to accepting no compromises, it's the creators of *Dark Souls II*.

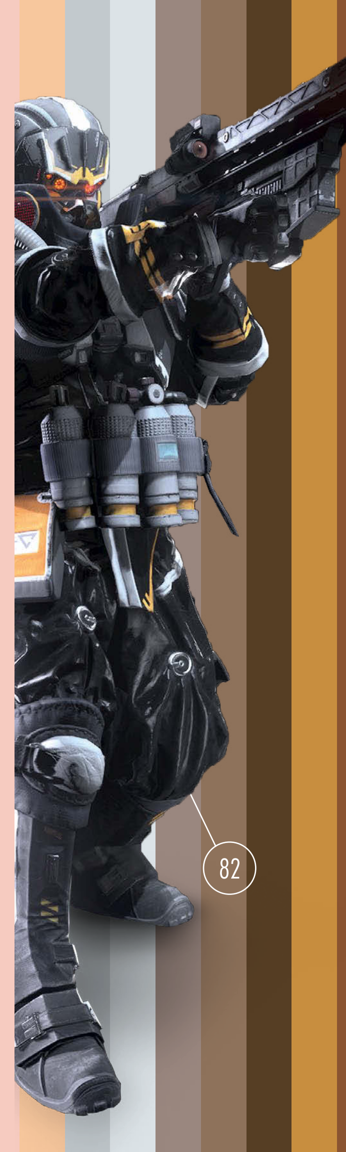


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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

Both PlayStation 4 and Xbox One (1) were day-one sellouts around the world. On p10, we look at the sales, the software, the hardware hiccups and the little features that seem like a true generational leap. Japan will have to wait until February before PS4 arrives, but it still has a new PlayStation console to tide it over. On p14, we test Sony's Vita TV (2) and look at how the microconsole represents a very different but no less important generation of hardware for Japanese players. The way Japanese players choose to play is very different, and so are the games they choose to play. *Project Diva* (3) is among Sega's most successful games in the region, across consoles, handhelds, mobile and arcades, and in 2013 it finally came west. We look at the pop-culture phenomenon that is its Vocaloid star on p16. On p18, we discuss Sony's academic investments and the PlayStationFirst programme (4), designed to put development kits in the hands of aspiring developers at schools and universities across Europe. Atari's golden age boxart (5) falls under the spotlight in a new book showcased on p20. Sony's Shuhei Yoshida (6) questions Nintendo's 'core gamers' message in Soundbytes on p22. And finally, in My Favourite Game on p24, Ender's Game star Asa Butterfield (7) talks about the console/PC divide, parental views on games, and spending his downtime battling opponents in *Dota 2*.



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The dawn of the new generation

Xbox One and PS4 sell millions, forget some of their promises, and introduce quiet revolutions

Xbox One and PlayStation 4 both sold over a million units in their first 24 hours on sale. Sony was quick to announce even higher figures following the second of PlayStation 4's staggered launch dates, thanking players for the console's 2.1 million sales across 32 markets. Some 250,000 PS4s were sold within 48 hours of its UK launch, the fastest-selling console in the region's history, putting it dramatically ahead of the 150,000 Xbox Ones that sold in the same amount of time.

But early figures are a poor indicator of longterm results. The victor in the opening salvo of this generation was decided not by players' interest, but by manufacturing; Sony beat Microsoft before the queues outside stores even started by putting more consoles on more shelves across more of Europe and North America. Xbox One has made it to 13 countries and PlayStation 4 to 32. One's international sales figures weren't made available with any haste, either – almost certainly for fear of a comparison that could only be unfavourable. Better to keep quiet and remind everyone that One sold out, just like PS4.

The next 12 months will be more telling. Even Wii U sold out on its US launch day, after all. As shelves fill up with the second and third waves of Xbox One and PlayStation 4 allocations, a new battle will develop and buying decisions will be guided by early adopters' first impressions.

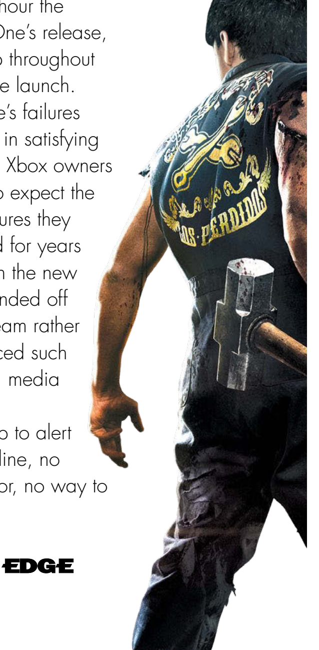


Microsoft ensured a good turnout for its Xbox One launch party at the Best Buy on New York's Times Square by sending out zombies, Roman centurions and supercars – and keeping back a couple of thousand units for people who hadn't preordered the console

> The next 12 months will be more telling. Even Wii U sold out on its US launch day, after all

PS4's start was on paper markedly worse than One's, its servers collapsing under the strain of the European launch, despite Sony disabling the console's code redemption capability and What's New section, ordinarily populated by updates from friends and Sony's network. Live, meanwhile, stuttered for an hour the day before One's release, but stayed up throughout the worldwide launch.

Xbox One's failures were instead in satisfying expectations. Xbox owners have come to expect the best, but features they have enjoyed for years are absent on the new console, its UI seemingly handed off to the Windows 8 design team rather than to the experts who placed such importance on 360's social, media and game-specific features.



Xbox One has no pop-up to alert players when friends are online, no controller battery life indicator, no way to gauge hard drive space, no background music player, and slow access to essential features. Achievements, once available as a neat checklist available in just a few clicks, is now a dedicated app and agonisingly slow to load. The Friends list – once called up with a single button press – is also now an app that drags itself lethargically into life and omits critical information and options. You can't see friends in parties, can't quickly join their games, and the list no longer displays the biographical information that made players identifiable. Even with lower expectations to meet, Sony's minimal PS4 user interface is a huge improvement over the old XMB, and is clearly friendlier than Xbox One's 'there's an app for that' approach to everything a player might need to do in a hurry.

Xbox One's hiccoughs – the mandatory deletion of missed game



In operation, the retail PS4 is the slightly louder of the two, though the unlucky few whose Xbox One had a faulty disc drive would say different. At US launch, fears were raised over PS4's Blue Light Of Death, but Sony insists the failure rate is less than one per cent

LIFE'S A TWITCH
The PlayRoom caused so much trouble for Twitch.tv because it is a window into the real world, rather than a virtual one. 'In-game footage' streamed from *The PlayRoom* is little more than a webcam feed of the user's living room. Within days, some elements of the Twitch community were menacing children streaming *PlayRoom* footage, calling impromptu PS4 talkshow The Spartan Show to troll the hosts, and streamers were exposing themselves – or in at least one case, their sleeping wife. Twitch caters to over 35 million visitors every month; console players are a new part of that demographic, to the disappointment of many existing Twitch users, and they've become an experiment in progress that has already seen its first failure. Within two weeks, Twitch had banned *The PlayRoom* feeds. It's a unique case, but as games experiment with new forms and function, likely to be the the first of many.

invites, Party Chat's insistence on inviting users to your game – make bold, incorrect assumptions about players' habits, and together they gradually stack to form a list of reasons to not buy an Xbox One. That list has been given literal form at xboxfeedback.com, a surprisingly level-headed rundown of One's UI problems compiled from forums and intended for Microsoft's perusal. If it's ignored, it will be at the company's peril; potential Xbox One owners will turn to existing owners for buying advice, and early adopters' concerns are clear.

That group has been especially vocal in instances where promises were forgotten. Kinect, everyone remembers, was supposed to be improved, but Microsoft's all-seeing eye feels no better than its predecessor at recognising gestures and its voice recognition is still too patchy to replace a pad, especially if you have an accent from outside the US. To showcase the new Kinect's power for gaming, Microsoft has only a universally panned beat 'em up (*Fighter Within*) and a demo of *Kinect Sports Rivals* – meagre benefit for the extra £80 Kinect has added to Xbox One's price tag.

From the games to the features, the promise of the new generation was greater than the reality, and consumers have been quick to notice. Sony's inability to deliver the instant-resume feature for games and apps it had promised is a tacit victory for Xbox One, which can resume games straight from standby; Microsoft's failure to have its Twitch.tv app available until early 2014 is a victory for Sony's Ustream and Twitch integration. The inability to bring Twitch to One at launch is especially egregious in an age where livestreams and Let's Play videos are central to discussions about games. Microsoft's Upload Studio, built by its Soho team, is better than Sony's PS4 equivalent, and the power of the cloud is evident in Microsoft's SkyDrive support for video and screen sharing, but fire up the world's largest game streaming site and One is conspicuously absent.

But the new generation has delivered a few surprises to delight rather than disappoint. PS4's built-in streaming was a neat idea when it was presented at February's announcement and E3's conference, but it feels essential after just a few days with a PS4. Up front on the PS4 Orbis OS, Live From PlayStation is a 24/7 gaming TV channel freed from your desktop PC or tablet. Some users have appropriated streaming features to host their own talk shows, others just to expose themselves, but in countless cases the systems have yielded a bounty of creativity from console users who have never had the option before.



The London launch saw Microsoft rename Leicester Square to Xbox One Square for the evening, with live performances from Plan B and Katy B. Sony had a popup lounge in Soho, with Tinie Tempah on launch night

SmartGlass, too, has made progress, almost entirely without Microsoft's help. Indeed, SmartGlass is now little more than a Microsoft brand for something everyone does or will do. *Battlefield 4*'s Commander app, *Assassin's Creed IV*'s companion app and Sony's own PlayStation app all present engaging arguments for the validity of the second screen. These experiences feel genuinely new; certainly you've played *Battlefield* and *Assassin's Creed* before, but have you ever supported a friend caught in a firefight on Xbox One using your iPad, or protected your friends' PS4 trade routes from your mobile phone? It took Sony to deliver on the promise of the second-screen experience Nintendo touted at E3 2011, with PS4's *The PlayRoom* delivering something so simple and so delightful – drawing a shape on your tablet and flicking it onto the big screen, where it becomes a 3D object – that it feels undeniably new. *The PlayRoom* draws on the strengths of each screen, using the simple tactile controls of a tablet and the scale of a TV to do something that could not be achieved using a traditional controller and single screen.

> It took Sony to deliver the promise of the second-screen experience Nintendo touted at E3 2011

And as a second screen, there is nothing to match the experience offered by PS Vita. Players had been taught to be sceptical about game streaming via laggy PS3 examples, but on PS4 the experience of sending your console game to your handheld is near seamless. After loading Vita's Link app, the handheld steals control from your PS4 within seconds, turning a console blockbuster into a game you can play anywhere. The Vita screen may not match up to the size of Nintendo's Wii U GamePad, but Sony's solution isn't tethered to the home.

Finally, there's One's TV integration, for now best enjoyed on the American

Preinstalled augmented reality app *The PlayRoom* quickly became a popular use of PlayStation 4's Share button. A husband-and-wife talk show was briefly the most popular PS4 stream, drawing some 200,000 views

side of the Atlantic. Xbox One's support for the 50Hz PAL signal will need work before the service is ready for the rest of the world, but used in a US home, the console's ability to become an all-in-one set-top box, even taking control of your TV and cable box, delivers.

Work is needed, and work will happen. PS4 and Xbox One are moving targets and there were entire generations of evolution between 360's Blades, NXE and final Metro dashboard. Sony's predictably unpredictable update schedule will mean constant tweaks, while Microsoft's more measured approach will see seasonal dramatic upgrades, and both consoles will be very different in November 2014 to what they were at launch.

Until then, should you be having problems, feel free to direct your complaints to Sony's president of worldwide studios, Shuhei Yoshida, at @yosp on Twitter and he'll get right back to you. Sony has used Ustream, Twitch, Twitter, Facebook and its own blog to hold a dialogue – or at least give the impression of one – with PlayStation owners. And who could have expected Sony to so dramatically subvert its traditional ways, leaving Microsoft's executives and public voices to appear unresponsive and robotic in the few communications they have on Twitter? The likes of J Allard and Peter Moore have moved on and taken Microsoft's exec charisma with them, while more exciting, more human, more dangerous voices, such as the company's partner creative director Ken Lobb, are shuffled to the background in favour of on-message drones who alienate those accustomed to public relations in the Twitter age.

When PS4 fans tweeted Yoshida about the console's absent MP3 player, he responded, promising to pass the concerns on to PS4's engineers. It's a clear "we hear you" from the very highest level that's perfectly aligned with Sony's 'For The Players' ad campaign – and it's better PR than money can buy. It's simple, easy and it might just sell consoles. Observe how Sony's executives talk to their users and it's clear the new Sony understands the evolving ways that players talk to each other, and that is perhaps PS4's most potent feature in a new generation of gaming. ■



Given that Microsoft announced a Twitch.tv partnership during its E3 conference, it's baffling that livestreaming was only available at launch on Sony's machine. Live From PlayStation makes a solitary PS4 feel like part of a larger, hugely social whole, a resounding coup in terms of early user impressions

Dolce Vita TV

Why PS Vita TV, not PS4, is the next-gen PlayStation that Japan really wants

Sony's much-hyped home console may not reach Japan until February, but while the western world went mad for PS4 in November, the nation did get its own device – one tailored to the market.

In its first week, PS Vita TV came third in the hardware charts behind 3DS XL and Vita, selling 42,172 units. The budget microconsole allows players to play their new copy of *God Eater 2* – out the same week and even bundled with Vita TV at many stores – on their TV with upscaled 1080p visuals.

Japan is no longer a home console market. 3DS consistently tops the hardware sales charts, and even Vita has been picking up since its price drop in February, thanks in part to a growing library of *Monster Hunter* clones and RPGs that appeal to local gamers. Vita TV, then, is a happy compromise, priced at a low ¥9,954 (£60), or ¥14,994 (£90) with a DualShock 3 controller and 8GB memory card. It suits a nation full of busy players who want to transfer their Vita games to the big screen after the commute home.

Namco Bandai's God Eater 2 looks gorgeous on a HDTV and could easily pass for a PS3 game

There are limitations. With no touchscreen, touchpad, camera or gyros, Vita TV is incompatible with several high-profile Vita titles. Games such as *Gravity Rush*, *Killzone: Mercenary* and *Hatsune Miku: Project Diva f* simply do not launch, though *Killzone* will be patched in 2014. Still, plenty of big-name games are compatible with Vita TV, such as the forthcoming *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* HD remakes, along with over 100 other Vita games and an archive of PSP, PS1 and PC Engine games. The device also taps into services such as Niconico, Music Unlimited and Reader.

The interface is almost identical to Vita's, from the Android-style home screen to the LiveArea launchpad for each app, with just a few tweaked menus and the touch controls mapped to the DualShock 3 buttons. If anything, it's not quite customised enough. Popup messages have not been resized for a TV, and the upscaled menu screens are far from true HD. But the system is functional and responsive, and just like Vita, it wakes from sleep on the screen that you left it.

We've given our Vita TV an extensive test and found it to be every bit as robust as a Vita for gaming: the compatible games run perfectly, and since it can sync two controllers at a time, it makes a great home for multiplayer PSOne classics, especially if you don't have a PS3. Unfortunately, you can't use a Vita as a controller for Vita TV (wouldn't that have solved the problem of touch and motion?), but you can connect with other Vita handhelds for local network play, which works just as it does between Vitas. Namco Bandai's *God Eater 2*, one of the system's most visually striking games, looks gorgeous on an HDTV and could easily pass for a PS3 game. Getting games and apps on Vita TV works just like on Vita, too. It has a card slot for retail games as well as a memory card slot and 1GB of internal memory for downloads. You can choose to swap your memory card between a Vita and Vita TV, or load the same apps onto each and transfer saves via PS Plus.



Worldwide Studios president Shuhei Yoshida has hinted that Vita TV tech might find its way into other Sony set-top devices



But some of Vita TV's functions offer poor solutions to admittedly tricky problems. There is a virtual touchscreen for those games that will run it, activated by clicking L3 and R3 to bring up cursors for front and rear touch that are then controlled with the analogue sticks and button presses. It's easily toggled by accident and not ideal for twitch tapping.

For now, another of Vita's best features is lost with the lack of Remote Play for PS3 and PS4, due in a future update. What we saw of Remote Play running *Knack* at the Tokyo Game Show looked good, though, with a smooth framerate, and the promise of one day being able to take a Vita TV on holiday and stream PS4 games from home – Internet connectivity speed permitting – remains an attractive one.

It's far from a perfect package, then, but it seems welcome in its home nation, already being sold out on Amazon Japan. And this is a resolutely eastern console, only supporting PSN regions around Asia. For now, at least, European and North American PSN accounts are inaccessible, and since Vita's memory cards are tied to just one PSN account, western Vitas are incompatible with Vita TV, making it near worthless for importers.

Whether it will reach Sony's second target market – non-gamers who may choose the device over an Apple TV – remains to be seen, and for now Sony has no plans to release the console in the west, where heavyweight consoles battle for control. Vita TV serves a niche, very Japanese audience: players who want their mobile games on the big screen, and the family PlayStation streamed to bedroom TVs. In its own way, Vita TV is catering to a very different next gen. ■





This DualShock 3 comes as part of Vita TV bundles. DualShock 4 support is promised in a future update

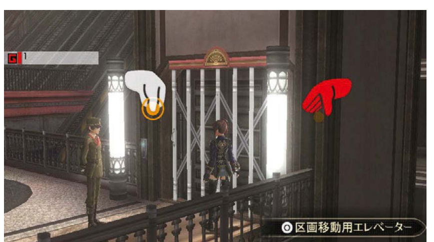


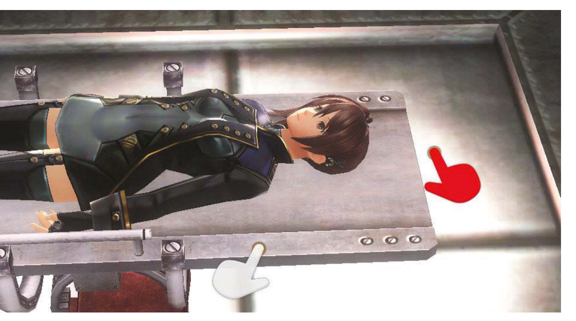




God Eater 2 is just one of over 1,300 officially supported titles for Vita TV. Along with most Vita software, the device plays numerous PS1 and PSP games







The virtual touch controls are an imperfect solution to a tough problem. Not all games support them, but R3 and L3 cater for front and rear touch respectively, and can be used in tandem

EXTENDED FAMILY

Vita TV is not the only new addition



Vita TV may be the highest-profile addition to Sony's Japanese portable family, but it's far from the only new development to surface of late. A pair of Sony tech staff recently revealed to a Japanese gaming site that the original Vita had a 1080p upscaler chip inside it all along – possibly what the mystery port on the top of the PCH-1000 unit was intended for. However, the chip has been removed from the redesigned PCH-2000 unit, which hit Japanese shelves in October. And that's not the only thing the new budget-conscious unit eschews, cutting out the OLED screen in favour of an LCD one, dropping proprietary memory cards and also shaving away 15 per cent of the 1000's weight.

Better than reality?

The unlikely westernisation of synthetic Japanese pop icon Hatsune Miku and her Project Diva series

Since she's really a package of Vocaloid voice synth software that sings whatever melody and lyrics you program in, Hatsune Miku is the star you can manipulate without needing to be Simon Cowell. Indeed Niconico, Japan's YouTube, is awash with music videos – thousands of collaborations between musicians, artists and animators, both hobbyists and pros – that feature Miku.

By no means the only Vocaloid package, Miku is the closest to sounding human yet, down to the 'breaths' she takes between words. Her voice was recorded from a real singer (Saki Fujita), then cut into samples to be rendered with a digital timbre. Depending on the skill of the musician using her, Miku can sound eerily alive and, being born of pioneering tech, she is a perfect match for videogames.

"Hatsune Miku is totally open to interpretation by anyone," says **Hiroshi Utsumi**, the Sega series' project leader, referring to the almost open-source nature of Miku, which results from Crypton Future Media and Yamaha's cunning decision to make use of the Vocaloid royalty-free. "Because of that, she means something different to each person."

Starting out on PSP in July 2009, the *Hatsune Miku: Project Diva* series has grown in the handheld space ever since. It even offered one of Vita's first system sellers in Japan, namely August 2012's *Project Diva f*. The combined sales for that and the March 2013 PS3 version surpassed 400,000 copies, earning PS3 releases in the west this summer.

"I think if it had been anything other than a rhythm game, the fans wouldn't have liked it as much," says Utsumi, who oversees the home versions of *Project Diva* and 3DS offshoot *Hatsune Miku And Future Stars: Project Mirai*, as well as the *Project Diva* arcade game. In fact, it was the series' early users that supplied its marketing material, with Utsumi's team turning to the online Miku community to cherry-pick fan-made content.

> Miku can sound eerily alive and, being born of pioneering tech, is a perfect match for videogames

The team at Sega handling *Project Diva*, taking great care to understand its audience, seems very different to the one overseeing Sonic's decline. For one thing, the game itself is tight and robust, limited mostly to one button on its easiest setting, but a kind of musical bullet-hell shooter at its most extreme. It caters for both ends of the Miku fanbase, from the casual music fans to the obsessive otaku.

Beyond the packaged content lies a ridiculously deep edit mode for the kinds of otaku already creating music with Miku's Vocaloid software, in which you can import your own MP3s, program button charts and even make a music video with an animated Miku. Players can then share their creations online.

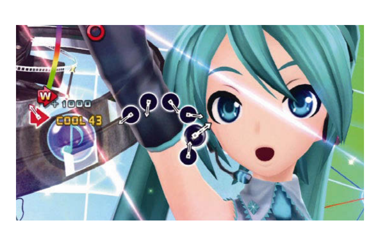
Project Mirai, the 3DS version, is aimed at a younger demographic and comes with a chunky, toy-like visual style. While *Diva's* Miku is based on the original Yamaha synth-inspired designs by illustrator KEI, *Mirai's* is taken from the Nendoroid figurine line, with an oversized head for extra cuteness. The 3DS game is simplified, with no edit mode and less busy presentation. The result has been sales of around 180,000 copies since its March 2012 release.

VIRTUALLY EVERYWHERE

In Japan, Hatsune Miku's visage adorns Domino's Pizza boxes, convenience store frontages and snack packets, as well as art books and interactive exhibitions, such as the temporary Miku Café at Tokyo's swanky Roppongi Hills complex earlier this year. She's in the pop charts via musicians such as Supercell, who call on her as an almost-human face for their bedroom productions. She performs cutting-edge live shows as a hologram, held at major summer festivals everywhere from Japan to the US. You can even have the turquoise-haired popstrel appear in your bedroom, thanks to Sony's PSN Plus exclusive game *Miku Miku Hockey* for Vita, in which she plays table hockey with you via an AR marker card.



The updated *Project Diva Arcade* coin-up is about to hit Japan



***Project Diva F* includes 38 songs, a few of which were commissioned specially for the game. Most, however, were uploaded by fans in the community**

The localisation of *Project Diva F* again gave Sega a chance to reach out to the community. After years of requests, Sega ran a post on its English-language Facebook page that read simply, "Like & share if you want *Hatsune Miku: Project Diva F* for PS3 in the west."

Three days, 25,000 likes and 15,000 shares later, the campaign was deemed a success – much to the surprise of many on Utsumi's team – and the game was released on PS3 in August in North America and September in Europe. "It helped that the game is light on text anyway," Utsumi says. "We left the songs with their original Japanese lyrics and just added subtitles and translated menus."

At the time of writing, western sales figures are not yet available, but Utsumi sees this as a test that will help decide whether the game, and sequels such as *Project Diva 2nd*, will be released on other formats outside of Japan.

Hatsune Miku herself made her western debut in August with the release of a Vocaloid package which had been designed to sing in English. Utsumi hopes that one day there will be a large enough pool of English-language Miku songs by western fans for a fully localised version of the game. "I'd be very interested in doing that," Utsumi says. "I'm sure it would turn out quite differently." ■



Early demand in Europe and North America suggests the west may also get to enjoy upcoming Miku sequels, such as *Project Diva 2nd* and *Project Mirai 2*, as well as a new version of the popular *Project Diva Arcade* coin-op

Class of PS4

Five European universities now have PS4 dev kits, but how will Sony's PlayStationFirst scheme benefit the game industry?

The clue's in the name. PlayStationFirst is not the result of a philanthropic whim to nurture learning for the sake of education. It is an unabashed scheme to place Sony's platforms – Vita for most and PS4 for a select few – in front of a fresh generation of developers at some of Europe's most respected institutions.

The project is not new, having been conceived in the pre-PS2 era. But although PSFirst isn't a knee-jerk reaction to the popularity of indie development for mobile platforms – now a conventional career aspiration – the benefits for Sony of getting dev kits into the hands of aspiring Terry Cavanaghs are plain enough. Fostering a production line of game creators who feel at home using its architecture makes commercial sense. But is PSFirst good for students, and for games?

Unsurprisingly, educators at the five institutions selected as PS4 partners – Gamer Camp at Birmingham City University, Sheffield Hallam University, The University of Abertay Dundee, NHTV University in the Netherlands and PlaygroundSquad in Sweden – believe the answer to those questions is yes. But then the opinions of those educators, all seasoned developers and academics with enviable industry ties, should be taken seriously.

"It's fantastic to be in Sony's first wave of institutions receiving PS4 dev kits," says **Dr Jake Habgood**, a senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. "I remember getting my first PS1 dev kit back at Gremlin in the '90s. I literally didn't want to go home each day." Habgood, a former Infogrames and Sumo Digital project manager, also heads up Sheffield Hallam's own development studio, Steel Minions. "It's inspiring to see that same voracious appetite in my own students," he says, "and the fact they get to use this kit before other students will give them a tangible advantage on their CVs."

While students are buffing their LinkedIn profiles, they'll also develop their professional skills as they seek to be published via PlayStation Network. All of the selected institutions are known for their commitment to mimicking industry practice. And Sony hopes students will be better prepared for any workplace after participating in PlayStationFirst.

"The fact they get to use this kit before other students will give them a tangible advantage"

"Studios need and expect graduates to be work ready," says Gamer Camp Studios director **Oliver Williams**. "Few studios have the time and resources to spend on training graduates. The PSFirst initiative backs institutions who teach actual game development, and therefore the recruitment and induction burden on studios who hire graduates is less."

Brian Beuken, a lecturer in game programming at Dutch university NHTV, believes the specific access PSFirst affords is invaluable for students. "Sony's vision has allowed access not only to hardware but to software such as PhyreEngine and PlayStation Home," he says. "The partnership allows us to receive cutting-edge technical information and to participate in Sony's forums, helping to ensure our continued excellence in preparing students for the requirements of an ever-evolving game industry."











From top: Dr Jake Habgood, senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University; Oliver Williams, Gamer Camp Studios director; Brian Beuken, lecturer at NHTV; Gregor White, director of academic enterprise at Abertay Dundee; Magnus Björkman, business coach at GameCubator

There is also a wider benefit to the game education sector with a knock-on effect for industry, as **Gregor White**, director of academic enterprise at Abertay Dundee – home to the biggest Vita development lab in Europe – says. "The PlayStationFirst project offers a forum where academics and developers can meet. The best academics in Europe can get together and share processes. We have access to developers within Sony and a line of sight on the latest developments. It makes our projects and student experience more relevant."

Oliver Williams says the scheme is not just about boosting employability, but feels it's vital for the future of the industry. "Next-gen consoles have the opportunity to reignite sales, which have been in decline for some time," he notes. "Giving gamers new experiences could be the key to generating this growth. By giving unjaded, enthusiastic and able young people access to the technology and support to create such experiences, PSFirst can have a role in the success of next-gen gaming."

Certainly PS4 is having an impact on Jake Habgood, who is in little doubt of the platform's core strength. "It's definitely the potential for indie games on the PS4 that is getting me most excited. The likes of *Journey*, *Flower* and *Ibb And Obb* on the PS3 were all really inspiring examples of what indies can achieve."

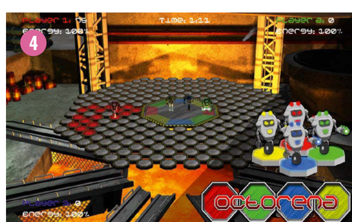
GameCubator business coach **Magnus Björkman**, who has ties to PlaygroundSquad, is another believer: "By supporting the training providers with dev kits and support, we hope to be able to give back some new, interesting game concepts and, who knows, maybe some new, innovative games to the market." ■

STUDENT SHOWCASE
1 A University of Abertay student shows off PS Vita work. 2 RPG *Anura* is being developed by a team at PlaygroundSquad, Sweden. 3 Character art by Playground Squad student Christoffer Agren. 4 Matt Driver and Tom Avison created *Octorena* using Sony's PhyreEngine at Sheffield Hallam University. 5 *Frozen Inferno* is a thirdperson adventure made by a PlaygroundSquad team. 6 Character art by animator and artist Emelie Laggar. 7 Work by PlaygroundSquad aspiring artist Johan Karlsson. 8 Sheffield Hallam students use a PS4 dev kit in the Steel Minions studio. 9 A close-up of Steel Minions' dragon design. 10 Concept art from Steel Minions game *Zool Planets*















FUTURE GAZING

Why PSFirst is a 'big deal' for gamers and the game industry

"A new talent pool is in education now, and we want to foster that talent to be PlayStation-savvy developers," says SCEE's head of academic game development, **Dr Maria Stukoff**, addressing the rationale behind PSFirst.

"We have always been on the lookout for the highest quality of game makers and PSFirst wants to push the boundaries for talent and for us to be at the starting point of young developers' careers.

"One of the most exciting successes is creating a self-publishing route for student IP with PlayStation. This is what PlayStationFirst stands for – create your first game with PlayStation. This is a big deal, and universities have responded by setting up labs and in-house dev studios. PlayStationFirst aims to inspire our fanbase, challenge the players to become active game makers, and to find a voice in the industry."



GRAPHIC DESIGN

How master artists filled in Atari's blanks

With only a 1.19MHz CPU to play with, a lot of Atari 2600 design had to be created outside the games themselves by artists who brought fantasies boldly to life.

In a new book, enthusiast **Tim Lapetino** looks at the history of Atari game covers, such as 1979's *Video Chess* (pictured), starting from the console's debut in 1977. "The visual styles are a combination of the artists' creativity and the inherent limitations of the console itself," he says. "Those beautiful illustrations served as a gateway connecting the imaginations of gamers to the simple game graphics."

Video Chess is just one of 136 pieces Atari commissioned. "At times I've felt like a private eye," Lapetino says, "paging through old magazines, internal Atari newsletters, viewing negatives through printers' loupes. We've unearthed a lot about the culture of the artists and Atari, and we're excited to preserve these stories."

Lapetino hopes The Art Of Atari: From Pixels To Paintbrush will be out for Christmas 2014. ■

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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"[Just because] I can plug a controller into my tablet and put the game on my TV **doesn't mean console is over.** It means Google, Apple and Samsung have joined the console business."

Former EA boss **John Riccitiello** asks the press to stop wondering if tablets will kill consoles

"Some of these characters are already hyper-sexualised. We're not running for President. We're not sending a message. No one should look to our game for that."

Heroes Of The Storm director **Dustin Browder** on accusations of sexism. He later apologised



"[Valve has] done an amazing job of building this thing that, in a lot of ways, we should have been building at Microsoft."

Phil Spencer laments one of the many balls his company's dropped in PC gaming

"I don't know what was Nintendo's goal when they launched Wii U. The messaging saying 'We are for core gamers' was a bit confusing."

Sony Worldwide Studios president **Shuhei Yoshida** is as baffled as everyone else

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Batman*
Manufacturer Raw Thrills/Specular Interactive

Raw Thrills is big on branding, and few entertainment brands are bigger than Batman. Specular Interactive's long-rumoured open-world *Batman* driving game debuted at November's IAAPA show with a cabinet designed to attract attention.

The game of "explosive vehicular carnage" offers 36 missions and 12 different vehicles torn from Batman's TV and movie appearances, including the Animated Series' bullet-like car, the Adam West two-seater, the Gothic and neon Batmobiles from the Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher movies, Rocksteady's *Arkham Asylum* design, plus the Tumbler and flying Bat from the Chris Nolan movies.

With a limited budget and small team, Specular has built a solid Batman racer. Combined with Raw Thrills, the developer has already made *H2Overdrive* and *Dirty Drivin'*, but the games are almost beside the point. Raw Thrills is about cabinets and the sheer scale of *Batman*, with its towering bat emblem, custom components and 500 LEDs, makes for a striking presence in arcades.



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My favourite game Asa Butterfield

The Ender's Game star on age and the perception of games, Dota 2 and getting to know pro players

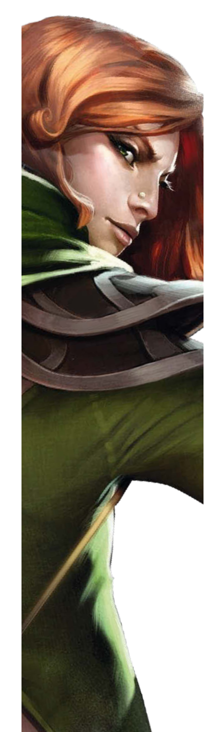
Despite having just 16 candles on his most recent birthday cake, Ender's Game star **Asa Butterfield** has already worked with a who's who of Hollywood greats, including Martin Scorsese and Harrison Ford. But his career hasn't stopped the British actor from racking up almost 800 hours on *Dota 2*.

Is *Dota 2* a full-blown obsession?
It's the game I play the most, yeah. A lot of my friends who don't play it are like, "It's the same map. How can you keep playing the same game over and over again?" The map's always the same, but the things that you do in each game mean no two are alike. And because it's a team game, quite a lot of my friends play it. We get on Skype and have a laugh. It's such good fun.

When did gaming start for you?
My brother and I would play *Driver* and *Metal Gear Solid* on PS1, but the first console I had myself was a GameCube. I'd play *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker* and *Mario Kart: Double Dash* for hours. The HD version of *Wind Waker* is what makes me want to get a Wii U.

Did you have to put gaming on hold while filming Ender's Game?
I did; I played very little. I occasionally jumped on *Battlefield 3*, but that was about it. There was very little downtime to be able to do anything. If I wasn't on set, then I'd be in school. I do enough extracurricular stuff and I get good grades. My dad lets me [play 18-rated games], but my mum's always been a bit apprehensive about the amount of time I spend playing videogames. Compared to my friends, I don't play that much, to be honest. I'm sure as time goes on she'll come to the right side!

STAR POWER
Asa Butterfield started acting at just eight years old, his big break coming two years later when he was cast as the titular star of The Boy In The Striped Pajamas. A legion of fans followed in the wake of the BBC's Merlin, where he portrayed deadly druid Mordred. In 2001, Scorsese cast Butterfield as the lead in his love letter to Georges Méliès, Hugo. And this year he stars as Ender Wiggin in the adaptation of Orson Scott Card's seminal Ender's Game.



Do you think games will one day be as integral to training soldiers as they are in Ender's Game?
My generation has grown up around technology, so for us it's second nature to be able to take out a phone and go on the Internet, and the same can be said of computer games. As time goes on, they're becoming more and more realistic and I'm sure people will be using them to train soldiers. Even today, videogames are used to enhance reactions and help you to think in different ways. Games are tools we can't take for granted. There's a lot of negative light put on them, but I think they're especially useful.

"I think Microsoft have lost a lot of fans. And I think Sony do a lot more for gaming as an industry"

Do you think gaming culture is depicted unfairly by the mainstream press?
I think it's depicted pretty unfairly, because you only see the negative side. There was nothing in the news about the *Dota 2* championship, even though it was the biggest prize pool for any eSports tournament ever.

Do you consider yourself part of the generation that will change the perception of gaming?
It'll be a great thing for gaming if that does happen. And I'm sure as technology becomes an even bigger aspect in our lives, gaming will become more evident. That's partially to do with a lot of adults, the older generation, who didn't grow up with gaming, so it's all quite alien to them. I think that's one of the reasons why there's a lot of negative light put onto it. But as my generation grows up and we become the people who are writing news and the leaders of countries… it will be a completely different thing.

Do new consoles interest you?
For the moment, I'm sticking with PC. I'm sure I'll eventually get one of the next-gen consoles; PS4, definitely. I've always been PS3, and Microsoft screwed up. They fixed some of what they've done, but I think they've lost a lot of fans. And I think Sony do a lot more for gaming as an industry.

During your Reddit Ask Me Anything, you seemed starstruck when Destiny messaged you.
[Laughs] Yeah. It's because in the last few years I've got quite interested in the pro gaming scene. I follow a lot of them, see what they're up to, and they're all pretty cool people. Now there are quite a few who I know well and I often play with.

It's time. What's your favourite game?
Lots. I really enjoyed *Outlast* because I thought the storyline was brilliant. *The Last Of Us* had an incredible story, too. I've still yet to get *GTAV*, which all my friends tell me is their favourite game. But in terms of the dedication and effort I've put into getting better, it's got to be *Dota 2*. ■



Butterfield plays a tactical genius in Gavin Hood's movie version of Ender's Game, and channelled his *Dota 2* experience for some of the battle scenes

WEBSITE

Historical Software Collection
bit.ly/1fYpPKi
The Internet Archive (IA) is a non-profit organisation that has been squirrelling away data for future generations since 1996, and now it has turned its attention to browser games. The IA has spent two years porting the MESS emulator (a cousin of MAME that can emulate hundreds of desktop computer varieties) to JavaScript, allowing you to run all manner of noteworthy software in a browser. The outfit has also launched the Historical Software Collection, which collates the most important titles from its archives. Games range in quality, with *Elite* sitting alongside the likes of *ET The Extra Terrestrial*, but every inclusion is important. Other titles include Jordan Mechner's *Karateka*, classic ZX Spectrum adventure *The Hobbit* and three versions of *Pac-Man*.

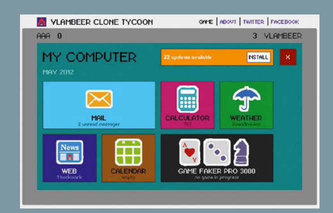


VIDEO

History Respawned: Assassin's Creed IV
bit.ly/1j0xQ1r
In the first of Bob Whitaker's History Respawned series, he dissects *Assassin's Creed IV* alongside Dr Bryan Glass, a history lecturer from Texas State University. They separate the game's fictional elements from its historically accurate ones, explaining why the Caribbean became a focus for pirates and how Ubisoft's handling of the time compares to the real thing. It's the first in what's hoped to be an ongoing series, and a piece of smart game criticism with an unusual angle if you have a spare 46 minutes for it.

WEB GAME

Vlambeer Clone Tycoon
bit.ly/1eikH2Y
Vlambeer's *Ridiculous Fishing* was beaten to the App Store by Gamenauts clone *Ninja Fishing*; *Luftrausers* was bootlegged by Rubiq Lab's *SkyFar*, and *Super Crate Box* was ripped off by Playberries for *Insane Zombie Carnage*. Vlambeer's games have been duplicated so many times that the only appropriate response is laughter. Enter *Vlambeer Clone Tycoon*, a browser game that positions you as a creatively bankrupt developer scouring the Net for clues about the content of Vlambeer's next game in the hope of beating it to the App Store. To do this, you'll need to take shortcuts, such as using dubstep stolen from YouTube and graphics nicked from an art student's portfolio. It's a work of satire almost too astute, and more creative than any of the duplicates that the studio's work has spawned.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A few more things that summoned our attention during the production of **E**262

KINECT ACCESSORY

Kinect TV Mount
In an age of increasingly prevalent phone hacking and data theft, obsessing over privacy is no longer solely the concern of paranoid conspiracy theorists. Which is brilliant news for peripheral manufacturer PDP, whose latest creation – a Kinect 2.0 mount that features a cover to block both of the device's cameras – plugs at least one of the many potential security leaks in your life. PDP says the mount, which holds the camera above your flatscreen set, will fit "nearly any TV", and you can slide that cover off easily should you wish to briefly risk surveillance for the sake of a game session. Since Kinect 2.0's announcement, Microsoft has backtracked on its original plans to require the device to be always connected, but you can never be too careful, can you?



continue

Sharing
Instant video capture and livestreaming feels thoroughly modern

Brooker on TV
How Videogames Changed The World refreshed the tired TV list

Forum hype
What better way to celebrate PS4 than to photo it with your cat?

Kinect filtering
Warnings for swearing too much at *FIFA 14*'s ref? A fine touch

quit

Anti-social
Xbox One's friends list and game invites feel thoroughly ancient

Brooker on TV
Must videogame TV always be a potted history of the industry?

Forum wars
What is it about new toys that reduces adults to playground loons?

Vita filtering
Warnings for phallic *Tearaway* creations? You never let us have any fun



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TWEETS

Know what's insane? The quality of game press interview questions has gotten no better in 20 years. Sigh.
George Broussard @georgeb3dr
Game designer, one of Duke Nukem's *creators*

Tell you what shocked me – the size of the Xbox 360 power supply. Bigger than the Wii except in width. Wire thicker than my neck.
Shahid Kamal Ahmad @shahidkamal
Senior business development manager, SCEE

Microtransactions, subscriptions and other biz models will be the next generation of games. It is that simple.
Christofer Sundberg @CHSundberg
Creative director, Avalanche Studios

I deleted *Candy Crush*. If I wanted to be forced to pay to be able to reach further levels I'd become a Scientologist.
Josh Groban @joshgroban
Singer songwriter





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DISPATCHES
JANUARY

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers want to end the endless to-do lists in videogames and reevaluate our perception of value. You also seek the common thread that makes games resonate with other readers, and attempt to put Clint Hocking straight. Elsewhere, **Steven Poole** argues for talking more confidently about games you haven't played, **Leigh Alexander** wants us to put down our rifles to see what else firstperson spaces have to offer, and **Brian Howe** collects together the oddest Humble Bundles in history.





Issue 261

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

Damned asides and statistics

It may be a cliché, but the phrase 'It's not the winning but the taking part that counts' is becoming more and more relevant to my gaming experiences. I am getting fed up of completion percentages, headshot counts, tallies of silent takedowns and number of irrelevant doodahs collected. These distractions are increasingly being used to replace genuine innovation in story or gameplay as a way to make us play more.

It used to be that if I really enjoyed a game, I would be happy to invest the time to find the secrets, explore the extra activities available, or unlock the hidden characters. Hence the hours lovingly spent breeding my Golden Chocobo and finding the Knights Of The Round summon in *FFVII*, or redoing a level in *Metal Gear Solid* to be even more sneaky. And if I didn't enjoy or wasn't as excited by a game, then I would often just complete the story – or not – and leave it at that without having my nose rubbed in the fact I hadn't finished everything.

Now, however, games seem to be constantly reminding me what I haven't done yet – '6/50 feathers collected' or '5/10 side missions complete'. Whether I like the game or not, the developers feel the need to poke me in the ribs and say, "Hey, you! Try this. Collect that. We programmed it." There's no finesse in that, and it's having a reverse psychological effect on me, because I don't want to be told what I should or shouldn't be doing while I am playing. Even in games I enjoy, my overall satisfaction is being marred by this buzzing. I finished the story in *Assassin's Creed III*, but barely dented the completion percentage because I wasn't even remotely inspired to collect feathers, Almanac pages or deliver letters. But I traded the game with the still-niggling voice of the developer in my brain saying I hadn't really finished it.

My father worked in sales, and he always used to say, "The greatest salesmen don't sell you something, they make you want to buy it." I'd like more games to make me want to do everything, not by clumsily using percentages, but subtly by appealing to my curiosity, or by being so damn enjoyable that I want to squeeze every ounce of pleasure from them. Easier said than done, I know, but many succeed. *BioShock* not only had me dancing to Andrew Ryan's tune in following its captivating story, but the artistry of the world and the incredible gameplay also had me wanting to see and do everything. I similarly adored *Limbo* and *Journey* for awakening a child-like sense of wonder, and thus inspiring me to explore and discover the story and world for myself.

Ultimately, lots of games feel a little too much like a never-ending chore nowadays. And that is the problem. I would like to be left to play, to take part and enjoy, without the developers signing my report card and telling me I haven't entirely won. By their count, perhaps, but not mine.

Will Barratt

Developers hunting for longer engagement with a big-budget release too often fall into this trap. The economic reasoning behind it is sound enough, but we agree: it can suck away enjoyment when every area is prefaced by a to-do list. Perhaps the bravest act anyone can make is to let their work speak for itself. A PS Vita is on its way.

Value proposition

Games often require the player to make a significant outlay; console games are frequently £40. Even on the PC, they can nudge this price. It seems reasonable, therefore, that value for money is a consideration. However, I'm not convinced we now get, or even recognise, value.

I recently completed *Remember Me*. In spite of some missteps (Slum 404? Aye, right), I enjoyed it. It had some interesting ideas. I've no particular desire to revisit it any time soon, but I had fun while I played and I got a sense of closure from completing it, which I did in fewer than 20 hours.

This is in stark contrast to *Skyrim*, which according to Metacritic, is the better game. I played that game for over 100 hours and, because it doesn't seem to make any particular quest central to the narrative, I didn't have the same sense of satisfaction from playing it. Bethesda was criticised for shipping a game that was broken and, sure, it was. But more unforgivable was the way the game was padded with pointless quests.

I can understand the desire of developers to create a large and complex world, but I'm not convinced most games have enough ideas to sustain much more than 20 hours of play. I'd far rather have a short, tight experience; even one which is more difficult. If you make a game over 100 hours long, but it's not very good, 20 hours is barely a fifth of the way through the experience. If your game is flawed and the player can see the end 20 hours in, it's far easier to forgive – the player hasn't had their time wasted.

This isn't something unique to gaming; there are too many films far in excess of 90 minutes and, especially in genre fiction, the tendency to publish novels over 500 pages long is regrettable. The Great Gatsby is a slim volume and it's more or less perfect.

Perhaps I'm alone in feeling this way, but I believe gaming could be immeasurably improved by developers having the courage to leave things out.

Richard Palmer

The problem is that it's easier to sell things that look bigger – which is why packaging often includes so much air. Triple-A games that feel the need to inflate themselves are no less wasteful, but it's our time and their pacing that they tend to squander.

Whole new worlds

Looking through the results of the vote for the 20 best games of **Edge**'s lifetime, I was immediately struck by the list's strong air of consistency. However, I then struggled to work out exactly what the uniting theme was, running fruitlessly through the usual thirdperson vs firstperson and genre categorisation. On further reflection, I've come to the conclusion that something less clinical lies at the heart of what we all love. (I like to think of the **Edge** readership as 'we', despite being cack at *Street Fighter*, and therefore a social pariah to some.)

The thread that runs through the top 20 is simply that all of the games have an extraordinarily well-developed sense of place. This sense is certainly not grounded in reality, unless I'm leading a terribly sheltered life and sentient comedy bombs and kung fu pandas do actually loom large in the lives of your readers. Neither is it grounded in a specific tone or timeframe, with a cartoonish '80s Miami knocking heads with more naturalistic near-future dystopias and worlds of pure fantasy. But every game on the list has, at its core, a world you are inexplicably compelled to explore. A world that – through some miraculous sleight of programming hand – is somehow believable even when you are doing terrible things to a sad, stately behemoth soaring above the desert of an empty world.

In some ways, I'm slightly surprised by the composition of the list. My gut feeling was that **Edge** readers would have tended towards a purist (skill-based) view of gaming that would have thrust the aforementioned *Street Fighter* and the collected works of Treasure towards the top. But as somebody whose personal choices would have encompassed *Ico*, *Flower* and the scene in *Fahrenheit* where kids are chucking snowballs for no reason other than the fact it looks heart-rendingly brilliant, I'm strangely delighted by the results.
Richard Brind

It was quite a list, right? Maybe one day, though, we'll publish some of the outlying nominations. You will be frightened.

Richard Palmer enjoyed *Remember Me* despite its flaws – partially because its journey was a lean one. He argues that other developers should cut out filler



Educating Hocking

I read Clint Hocking's column in **E**257 and I'm just realising it has quietly left me very disgruntled. The final sentiment in his piece is essentially along the lines that games are entertainment and nothing more. In fact, he says believing they are anything more is an insult to the modern gamer. I think he's got this exactly the wrong way around.

I have a role in education that allows me to support a newly started A-Level game design course that is by far the most oversubscribed class in my sixth form; the game industry is growing, basically, and so is the infrastructure that's designed to nurture it. From this perspective, I get to see what young people value in games and what they see as the future. Some of their ideas are very creative, some more generic. It's a mixed bag. But that's the point.

The proliferation of mobile gaming has broadened the range of audiences and these audiences have spoken with their wallets. This has opened up new genres and given credibility to some that were previously too niche. It has also allowed gamers to quantify the value of certain interactive mechanics and where they are used, so people can identify exactly what they like and what they don't. My students are able to draw from the most diverse array of influences this industry has ever produced, and this has challenged their perception of what being a modern gamer is.

"Games are outstanding for entertainment, but it's an insult to say they're nothing more"

Connectivity and variety have driven this change, and it's heartening to see Sony taking these elements as the cornerstone of PS4. Yet it is no longer a question about hardcore or casual. There are many different applications nowadays, meaning the simplest games can be played for the most complex of reasons: whether for education, to inform, rehabilitate, illuminate or to entertain. These are not mutually exclusive. Games are an outstanding medium for entertainment, but it's an insult to say that they are nothing more.
Ambrus Veres

A fine rebuttal, but Hocking's column was wryly poking fun at the industry to provoke just such a reaction as this, was it not? ■

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Cynical hardware bundles show videogame retail at its worst

There's a difference in upselling (promoting the purchase of a second controller to a mother with two kids) and gouging the customer by needlessly attaching product to a bundle.
Tom Cullen

Ex Game employee here. I worked the Wii launch and at one point they were saying that machines that staff had preordered were going to be put on hold so there were more for customers. Thankfully, they went back on that, but it's an indication of the contempt they hold their staff in, as well as their customers.
Jason Scott

Game will be extinct soon, so I can't blame them for trying. Retail's a bitch that will strip your wallet as best it can, for as long as it can. Don't expect morales and principles from the high street.
Craige Timmins

I speak as an ex Gamestation manager. The margin on consoles was pathetic for retailers but is made up on the accessories more than anything. Supply and demand and running a business; some of you ought to think about the real-world implications.
David Mitchell

Heartfelt thanks to Nintendo for releasing *SM3DW* on the day when everyone is popping into Game to argue about their missing preorder or trade in half a decade's worth of previous-gen tat. The hours just fly by.
Nick Dimmock



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Why we should all be more confident in talking about games we either haven't played or just skimmed

Torture in videogames, runs one argument, is too casual. The rapid, sadistic hurting of a recalcitrant enemy in your average military shooter is the gory equivalent of pressing a button on a vending machine that dispenses information. Cumulatively, such scenes also reinforce the highly dubious view that torture works. So in order to make us think about torture properly, a game should oblige us to perform it in a really elaborate and disgusting way.

Such, presumably, was part of Rockstar's ethico-aesthetic justification when it was building what rapidly became known as 'that' torture scene in *GTAV*. It generated a lot of intelligent commentary, almost none in its defence. Using a videogame controller to extract a man's teeth or smash his knees, people said, did not make them feel any more convinced than they already were that torture is wrong. Nor was it justified, they said, as a way to widen the emotional distance between player and protagonist. We already hated that guy, they said. Personally, I agree with them.

Did I mention that I haven't played *GTAV*? Well, I haven't. I mean, not for a second. I've read what other people have written about it and watched YouTube clips. Does this render my opinion about the torture scene invalid? Not a bit. We should all talk more, and more confidently, about videogames we haven't played.

I take my lead here from the French critic Pierre Bayard's wonderful text How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read. It is not a cynical bluffer's charter, but a serious argument about how books fit into our lives. There are, Bayard observes, Books You Don't Know, Books You Have Skimmed, Books You Have Heard Of and Books You Have Forgotten. These categories map quite nicely onto videogames. *GTAV* is a Game I Have Heard Of, having read about it and watched clips. This is certainly enough to form a view about some aspects of it, given Bayard's observation that: "Culture is above all a matter of *orientation*. Being cultivated is a matter not of having read any book in particular, but of being able to find your bearings within books as a system, which requires you to know that they form a system and to be able to locate each element in relation to the others." I can locate *GTAV* within the ludic system, and so can you.

> Did I mention that I haven't played GTAV? Well, I haven't. I mean, not for a second

A Game I Have Skimmed, meanwhile, must be one I have played only bits of. Woe to the hater who insists that any critique of a game by a player who hasn't trudged through all 60 brown, grinding hours of it must therefore be invalid. If a game is rubbish for 59, or even just nine, hours, nothing that happens subsequently can redeem that tedious theft of your life. And anyway, videogames themselves – in a long-overdue development – are starting to enable such skimming, offering players invulnerability or even the chance to skip a sequence entirely if they can't succeed.

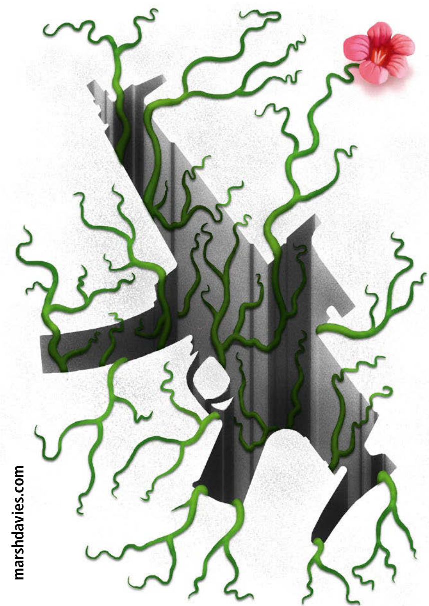
Each person, Bayard says, has an 'inner book': a fantasy book that would be entirely congruent with one's own personality. (My inner game must be some eye-bleedingly awesome mash-up of *Ico*, *Uridium*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Manic Miner*, *Ridge Racer Type 4* and *Modern Warfare 2*'s Spec Ops.) When we read an actual book, it is measured against our inner book and a third book is thereby created called a 'screen book'. (It screens off certain aspects of the actual book.) No two people ever experience the same book in the same way – they never have the same screen book. This is just as true of videogames; indeed, it's more blatantly true, given their algorithmic response to input.

When we talk together about a videogame, our two screen games meet in conversation and merge into a 'phantom game'. These phantoms, Bayard says, are the imaginatively remixed artworks that "fuel our daydreams and conversations, far more than the real objects that are theoretically their source". So a pedantic insistence on familiarity with every word of a given real book – or every minute or level of a videogame – is really missing the point of much cultural thought and conversation.

The more we talk unashamedly about videogames we haven't played, the greater will be videogame culture's intellectual strength and creativity. So it is time not to confess, but to joyfully announce that I have heard of *GTAV*, I have skimmed *BioShock*, I have forgotten almost everything about the ZX Spectrum text adventure *Circus* (retaining only a memory of super-eeriness), and I don't know anything at all about tower defence games. (Do towers need that much defending?)

Another big game I have only heard of is *Beyond: Two Souls*. Obviously, it's a QTE-fest, and much of the rest of what I know about Quantic Dream's latest plastic-cinema extravaganza I learned from Ellie Gibson's brief and hilarious YouTube video entitled 'Top Five Emotions In *Beyond: Two Souls*'. Is that enough to talk about it? Buy me a drink and try to stop me.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net


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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Is it time to put down our arms? It's not a popular question to ask, but it's a vital one for videogames

The adventure game *Myst* is now 20 years old. Yet to most people in my generation who grew up in a close relationship with games, it remains unforgettable. Its opening moments deposit the player on a beautiful, mysterious island full of ancient buildings and opaque machinery against the ambient sounds of creaking wood and lapping water.

It had to take place across islands, its creators have said, because the invisible walls necessary to confine gameplay in open spaces broke the immersion too much. And these spaces were uninhabited by humans, because the technology to make that interaction plausible wasn't quite there yet – you could argue it still isn't, and that we don't yet know how to build interactions with game characters that don't exaggerate the inhumanity of games.

Glassy-eyed AIs swaying in place and offering dialogue trees require more than a little suspension of disbelief. The only way to interact with people in game worlds that feels plausible has to be brief and quickly dispensed – the player needs to snuff out their animatronic lives before she has the chance to notice how unnatural they are.

For a game that doesn't include combat, it's better for people to be distant concepts and rarely confronted; better to be gone altogether, because then the player has a job to do. The absence of life is also an unnatural state, but it's one the player can resolve slowly and thoughtfully. *Myst*'s few characters are flickering echoes – part of the mystery of why the dreamlike islands exist at all.

From a few sensible design constraints, a transformative adventure game was born. In *Myst*'s heyday, it was thought to represent a bold new direction for games themselves, yet its success would never be repeated in its time.

Cyan's Rand Miller told me recently that's because that breed of environmental puzzle design – transporting, purposeful, story-driven – is deceptively difficult to do well. At the time, it took money and resources big publishers were apparently not eager to expend.

Things are quite different now, of course. You no longer need a big publisher or a well-heeled studio to make a game of *Myst*'s ilk. You can do it with a mod, or with a low-cost engine, and many do. *Gone Home* is an exploration-based game that hewed to similar constraints – a single house full of physical objects where all the people are gone; *Dear Esther*'s storytelling was enhanced by obeisance to the same concepts.

It's interesting to think that if *Myst* arrived in today's landscape, it would be viewed by the traditional gaming audience as an esoteric indie 'not a game'. Can you imagine that? It's generally frowned upon to express a preference for a lack of violence. If you don't like combat in firstperson games, you must not be hardcore enough. You aren't a 'real' gamer. You might even be a girl. But the current renaissance of developers exploring alternatives to combat – pushing against our understanding of what's entertaining, or permissible, to portray in firstperson spaces – is telling.

These are not creators who are too soft. Rather they're unearthing massive unsolved design problems – potential shelved at the waning of the adventure age because best practices were too difficult, too complicated to divine and perfect.

At the time of writing, *Myst*'s original creators are seeking Kickstarter funding for a new firstperson environment-driven puzzle game made in, of all things, Unreal Engine 4. Things come in cycles, Rand Miller told me. Industry watchers have anticipated the saturation point for FPSes for some time.

Being bored of making combat games doesn't indicate a developer too sensitive for blood and violence, or unable to compete in the hardened realms of supposed 'true' gamers. True appreciation for and participation in the form should mean a continuous willingness to seek new challenges and new means of interaction, shouldn't it? Toughness means the irrepressible urge to dredge up ancient problems and devise innovative solutions to limitations. Combat may just be a distraction from all the other interesting things that can be done with firstperson play.

> Combat may just be a distraction from all the other things that can be done with firstperson play

It's interesting to see that the traditional audience continually revolts, and often loudly, when anyone suggests that violence might be undesirable or excessive in a game, and that firstperson games without combat are somehow not real. To be fair, this is likely the result of two decades of moral panic around games, which are continually called up to play scapegoat for problematic behaviour in society. Real-world violence is, of course, not the fault of games, and somehow fans have completed their logic loop by declaring it treacherous and impure to criticise game violence in any way – even if the criticism is that the focus on violence is inhibiting to new avenues in the medium.

Audiences that profess a desire for violence are likely to be served more of it. It is unpopular to ask whether that's the best use of our time or our medium, but it's important. Perhaps experimenting with alternatives in the firstperson space will be embraced as it ought to be in time: as genuine bravery and devotion to a diverse and ever-expanding form of play.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

A cold, hard look at the so-called Humble Bundle and its increasingly bizarre slew of special editions

Something as roundly admirable as the Humble Bundle is hard to make fun of. One of the best ways to keep your finger on the pulse of the online gaming marketplace, it delivers well-curated collections of new titles and underexposed gems, DRM-free and for multiple platforms. Users set their own mercilessly exploitative prices, with a portion of the proceeds going to charity. Indie devs gain invaluable publicity and profits through sheer volume, forestalling suicide or starvation for a while longer. Rumour even has it that for every Humble Bundle sold, Jeff Rosen spends a minute singing Christmas carols to orphans in a soup kitchen. So, yeah, it's hard to fault. But You're Playing It Wrong loves a good challenge.

Turning a gimlet eye on the Humble Bundle, you might notice that its days as an anarchic creative platform for unknown developers are on the wane. Not for nothing did it drop the 'Indie' from its name. Recent times have seen a bundle of games by THQ, a company that finds common ground with indie developers only in its intimate familiarity with bankruptcy procedures; a decidedly un-humble bundle of EA games via Origin; and a Warner Bros Bundle that featured a pair of *Batman* games everyone had already played. As the overall scope of the Humble Bundles has grown, their contents have become more specialised, the genres more hidebound, and the retro-fondling more blatant. Must we endure five tower defence games for every *Hotline Miami*? If you think I'm exaggerating, let's examine some recent Humble Bundles.

First there was the Humble Platform-Shooter That Is Nothing Like *Contra* Bundle. It included eight games of eight-directional-shooting, pit-jumping, giant-boss-fighting awesomeness that all totally distinguish themselves from a certain '80s exemplar. In *Shadowplex*, you run and gun through a nightmarish dystopia of grey turrets and brown boxes. In *Cybershank*, you gun and run through a dystopian nightmare of brown sludge and grey girders. *Shadowplex 2* and *Cybershank 2* add fourplayer online co-op and stealth missions to the mix, while *Shadowshank* and *Cyberplex*... Oh, screw it. They're all just *Contra*, all right? They're *Contra* with cel-shading, mission trees and ragdoll physics. You know you'll play them.

> You might notice that its days as an anarchic creative platform for unknowns are on the wane

Next came the Humble Déjà Vu Bundle. Indie devs are always breaking ground, even if it's the same ground over and over again. *Trine 5* features new character classes in the Fishwife, the Courtesan and the Homunculus, all buxomly designed by the art director of *Dragon's Crown*. *Eets: In Space!* adds baffling wormholes and antigravity mechanics to a simple, addictive *Lemmings*-like core. *Bastion 3* is virtually indistinguishable from the first two, but with an expensive score by John Williams and narration by James Earl Jones. You also get *Cave Story+++*, which sounds like a programming language, but plays more like *Metroid* than ever, and *More Gratuitous Space Battles* – now 300 per cent more gratuitous.

After that, things got worse. Take the Humble Arty Experimental Game Where 'Deep Philosophical Allegory' Just Means Some Dude's Broken Heart Bundle. You'd already pondered the metaphysics of *Braid*, mulled over *Limbo*, contemplated *Dear Esther*, and mused upon *The Binding Of Isaac*. You'd experienced rising excitement as their various mysteries accrue and creeping disappointment when they turned out to be about some lost, generic princess or mother figure – with a stealth misogyny bonus if she's dead or there are overtones of vague religiosity. Well, the HAEGWDPAJMSDBHB let you relive that bell curve all over again in a trio of titles that set new benchmarks for games as art. *The Swallowing Of Jonah* is a roguelike-lite where your beloved primary school teacher tries to murder you in the belly of a whale. In *Salutations, Agnes*, you wander around a featureless desert writing letters to your dead mother ("impeccably depressing," critics rave). And in *Blanko*, with its revolutionary white-on-white art, you travel by sound alone until the world begins to blur into focus as you approach something – or someone. Oh, it's a girl.

That gave way to the Arrogant Mainstream Bundle. HD, GOTY and GTFO Editions abound in this bundle of glossy mainstream pabulum. As the blurb read: "It doesn't even matter what the titles are. Just buy it. It's for charity, you piker."

Finally, we've just received the Chastened Indie Bundle as an apology for the Arrogant Mainstream Bundle – with over $50 million in sales, we guess it can be hard to keep the Bundle humble. The contrite blurb reads: "We want to publicly state that our customers are not pikers, and they're not as interested in games about blowing up villages in Apache helicopters as we thought. To make it up to them, the Chastened Indie Bundle gets back to our roots, offering up *MerQury*, an experience where you hold and release the Q key to raise and lower the mercury in a thermometer. There are also three different deceptively cute games in which you engage in mortal combat with gruelling timed microtasks, and *Ms. Fez*, which is *Fez* with lipstick and bow."

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

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#262

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



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Why?



A new generation of machines shouldn't just mean higher resolutions and more visual effects – it should push the boundaries of what's possible to play, too. And it will eventually, because the previous round of consoles didn't only impose a technical ceiling on developers, but a gameplay one on designers. Many of the developers we've spoken to in the run-up to the PS4 and Xbox One launches have told us that what they're most looking forward to isn't an increased memory buffer or even a more powerful GPU, but the reduced need to compromise on their original visions.

Yet there is often a difference between what creatives want to create and what players want to play. With *Quantum Break* (p38), Remedy Entertainment seeks to blur the boundaries between videogames and episodic TV. You'll play a chapter of the game, and then watch a TV show that has been made to reflect the consequences of your in-game decisions. It's a logical step for a studio that was so obviously in cinema's thrall with *Max Payne* and then structured *Alan Wake* like a TV series. But is the boundary between games and traditional visual media one that players really want to see dissolve?

Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare (p42) raises similar questions. Our first hands-on with PopCap's 360 and Xbox One shooter proves broadly positive, but had anyone outside PopCap or EA really ever thought about how much they'd like to play a multiplayer thirdperson shooter set in the *PVZ* universe?

Yet it's worth giving each of these games the benefit of the doubt. Both studios have the best of intentions, after all, with Remedy trying to push the medium forward and PopCap broadening its own horizons. Given the choice between *Quantum Break* and a prettier *Alan Wake* sequel, or between *Garden Warfare* and *PVZ3*, we'd opt for the breath of fresh air every time, even if the end result might not be quite what we were hoping for.

MOST WANTED

DriveClub PS4
Both *Forza* and *Need For Speed*'s underwhelming next-gen debuts have left us feeling nervously optimistic about the delayed *DriveClub*'s prospects. Hopefully, Evolution will use the extra time to deliver a driving game worthy of new hardware, even if we have to settle for 30fps.

Persona 5 PS3
With Atlus's next JRPG not due in Japan till next Christmas, chances are we won't see *Persona 5* in the west until 2015. But healthy worldwide sales should convince Sega, Atlus's new parent company, to see merit in a release here.

Grand Theft Auto V PC, PS4, XO
No announcement yet, but surely it's coming. Rockstar built *GTA Online* to last beyond the 360 and PS3 generation, and the studio set a precedent with *Bully: Scholarship Edition*. Los Santos is beautiful already, but in 1080p and, dare we dream, rendered at 60fps? Hurry up, Rockstar.



H Y P E

QUANTUM BREAK

Remedy shatters the line between games and TV with a series that ties together both

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Remedy Entertainment
Format Xbox One
Origin Finland
Release TBC

The '90s have a great deal to answer for, not least the imposition of terrible live-action cutscenes on videogames. Despite the technical advances since, FMV has never shaken off the negative connotations it earned during the time of 3DO, CD-i and Mega-CD. But Finnish studio Remedy Entertainment has been quietly working away on its own FMV rebranding exercise for more than a decade, slipping live-action sequences into its film- and television-inspired games alongside rendered cutscenes. *Quantum Break* is the culmination of its experiments in storytelling.

"Life's too short to do small increments," Remedy CEO **Matias Myllyrinne** tells us. "We want to do what we can to improve the artform." To that end, the studio isn't simply switching rendered cutscenes for live-action ones, but delivering a TV series alongside its game. Forget the loosely overlapping strands of Trion Worlds' *Defiance*: *Quantum Break*'s episodes come on the disc with the game and are directly affected by your actions. It's not yet clear to what extent you will alter these prerecorded episodes, but at least they'll be directly associated with what you play. Perhaps the real question is whether players will want to watch non-interactive portions of story at all, but that's left up to you.

"You'll unlock the live-action episode at the end of the [gameplay] episode, but you can choose when you jump into that," says head of franchise development **Oskari Hakkinen**. "The best experience would be to play the game, watch the live action, then play the game some more, but if you've chosen to dedicate your two-hour slot to gaming and you don't want to watch live action straight away, you can continue on with the game and pick up on the live action from your iPad or phone at a later date."

"My gut tells me they'll play a section of the game, they'll watch the live action with a beer or a coffee, and then jump back into the game," Myllyrinne says. "Or they'll stop and do the double-barrel thing the next night – play the episode and watch the live action."

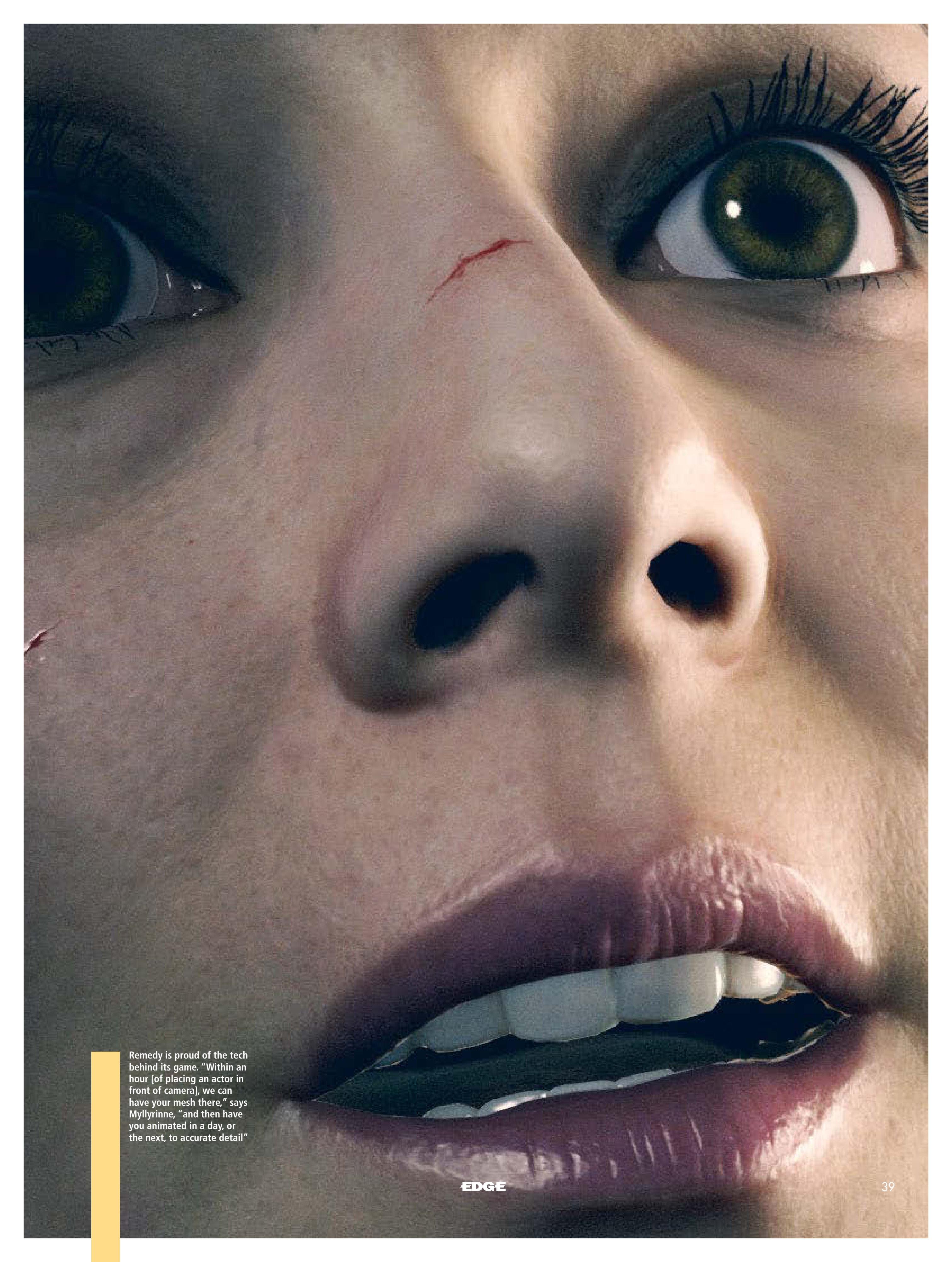
But while it's happy to clarify the live-action aspects, Remedy is still coy about how its game plays. It's understandable that Microsoft would want to prioritise launch titles now, but the lack of information around *Quantum Break* to date has been frustrating, the focus on its TV side leaving us in a state of uncertainty as to whether this fusion is being built for seasoned players or a brand-new audience. The truth, of course, is that Remedy is aiming for both, but Myllyrinne is contrite when we raise the issue.

"I think you're right; maybe we assume too much sometimes," he says. "But we want

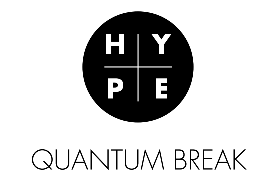


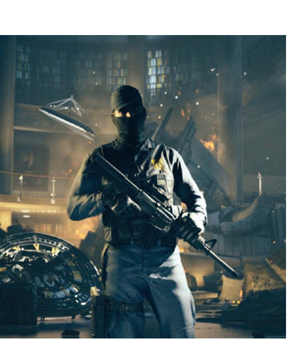


Matias Myllyrinne, CEO of Remedy, and Oskari Hakkinen, head of franchise development



Remedy is proud of the tech behind its game. "Within an hour [of placing an actor in front of camera], we can have your mesh there," says Myllyrinne, "and then have you animated in a day, or the next, to accurate detail"





Remedy is aiming high, but it's not yet clear that bit characters, such as enemy grunts, will match the astonishing quality of the game's leading cast

to put out an awesome action game with a very strong story told in a new way. At its heart, the gameplay needs to be good – how the game feels; how it plays; do you get a rush of adrenaline when you press the trigger and dodge for cover? If you don't have those things nailed down then nobody is going to be drawn in to the fiction either. Those fundamentals need to be polished to what I call a 'Remedy pedigree' – the standard that we need to hit. That will happen."

"This is a Remedy game," Hakkinen assures us, "and not only a Remedy game, but the ultimate Remedy game."

So what does the ultimate Remedy game entail? It turns out that for all its aspirations, *Quantum Break*'s frame is a traditional one: a cover-based thirdperson shooter, albeit with time manipulation mechanics and set-pieces. But this isn't just Bullet Time 2.0 – you'll be able to move through time, the game's tech simulating spectacular environmental destruction, but you'll also be at the mercy of

> ***"This is a Remedy game, and not only that, but the ultimate Remedy game"***

anomalies, which could leave you on the back foot. One example was shown at E3 earlier this year, when a cargo ship leaps forward through time, causing it to hit a bridge. And to suit the TV-like format of the story, players will take control of several different characters, including the antagonist.

"At the end of the episode, you get to play the bad guy, who has the most powerful time-manipulation powers of all," Myllyrinne says. "So he gets to choose which future comes to pass. You play that bad guy; you choose the moment. Then, once you've made your choice, you can enjoy a high-quality TV episode where you'll see how your choices impacted certain things.

"Unlike many other games, you actually get to know what the consequences of your choice are. [In other games], when I make a choice, I don't necessarily know what the impact of that decision has been, or why things turned out a certain way. Obviously you can have twists and turns, but it's good to understand the consequences of your actions. We should be making [choice] more meaningful for gamers and more engaging."

The setup allows writer and creative director Sam Lake to build on the structure he experimented with in *Alan Wake*, setting up cliffhangers and moving through story arcs within a larger narrative. This time, however, you'll have to wait to find out the fate of certain characters while you pick up the story from a different perspective.

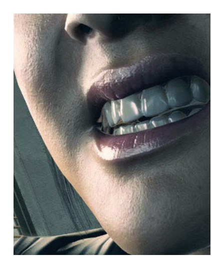
Myllyrinne believes that *Quantum Break*'s multimedia delivery makes sense on Xbox One, given the console's confluence of media types and its ability to render in-game characters which, if not quite photorealistic, are a close match to their counterpart actors. Max Payne might have had a cool leather jacket in his 2001 debut, but if you looked closely, you'd notice that he didn't have any ears. There are no such technical constraints for *Quantum Break*'s cast, so the switch between game and live-action episode should be less jarring. Whether Remedy can improve upon its previous games' dialogue, the quality of which varies wildly, is another matter.

Regardless of the content, why not render the episodes in-engine like cutscenes? Myllyrinne explains: "A game should be interactive and TV should be passive, or at least linear. For me, it feels more natural to watch a show than to watch a long cutscene. If I get a long cutscene... not naming names, but I start to wish it was interactive."

Metal Gear Solid's epic cutscenes aside, there's no precedent for what Remedy is attempting. Episodic adventures have enjoyed success lately, but none have asked players to switch between guns-blazing action and passive story consumption to such an extreme extent. And Remedy's promise that live-action episodes can be set aside to be watched later seems to undermine their importance in the overall experience.

However it ends, it's a bold experiment, but perhaps not a surprising one given the studio's history. For all the question marks still hanging over this project, Remedy is the one studio that's most likely to bridge the gap between TV and game effectively. ■





Too much reality

Remedy's quest for realism goes as far as taking moulds of the cast's teeth. Less invasively, actors are captured by an array of 32 cameras, the data from which is fed into four levels of quality of in-game model, the most detailed of which Myllyrinne promises will "stand up to anything". The setup is so accurate that the studio's artists have found themselves with too much detail. Myllyrinne recalls an actor who had a slightly shorter left leg: "We didn't spot it when filming. But when you're in game it's like, 'What's happening with the walk cycle?' It's almost like how they shoot models for magazines – how authentic do you want it to be, and how much movie realism do you want to put in?"



TOP RIGHT **This section sees a character trading fire with security forces before pausing time in order to avoid an exploding car.** ABOVE **The game's highly detailed environments look remarkably close to the original concept art, which sets out a vision of a mix of classical and futuristic architecture with stylised high-contrast lighting**

TOP LEFT **While we've only been shown the briefest glimpse of in-game footage, cutscene models occasionally leap across the uncanny valley for a moment or two.** ABOVE ***Quantum Break* uses a system developed by Pixelux Entertainment called Digital Molecular Matter (DMM) in order to model its environmental destruction. It simulates the properties of a wide range of real-world materials and has been used in many feature films.** RIGHT **With information so tightly controlled at the moment, we don't fully know why these security forces have to die. The body count is sure to be much higher in the game than it is in the TV series, however**



PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE

PopCap replants its tower defence series in squad shooter territory

Publisher EA
Developer PopCap
Format 360, PC, Xbox One
Origin NA
Release February 18 (NA), 20 (EU)



The Chomper is powerful when used properly, its burrowing ability offering temporary invulnerability and a one-shot kill if you can surface directly beneath an enemy's feet. Misjudge it, however, and you'll be left straight in the firing line

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare* – other than the fact that it exists at all – is how well the series' horticultural tussle translates to the team shooter genre. The plants have bedded into their new roles especially well, and prove as effective in three dimensions as they did in two.

Each of the plants' four available classes has its own projectiles and three special abilities. The Peashooter makes for a fine all-rounder, moving at speed and flinging seeds that inflict area-of-effect damage. The Sunflower is weaker, but can continue firing at zombies even as it heals other players via either a healing beam or by dropping potted satellite sunflowers that release health-giving sun drops. The Cactus can snipe with its needles, send a Garlic Drone into the sky to help you get into the thick of the action and order artillery strikes. And the Chomper, our early favourite, is more difficult to use, but capable of a one-munch kill if you can manage to get behind your quarry (or even underneath them by burrowing), helped along by the ability to fire gloop at targets that slows them down. The opposing undead, however, seem to have been trickier to reshape.

"It was a lot easier to [transpose] the plants than it was for the zombies," producer **Brian Lindley** confirms. "The plants' bodies are their weapons, right? We took a lot of the characters from *PVZ* and they just mapped perfectly into the roles we wanted them to play. The Sunflower makes sense as a healer. The Cactus makes sense as a sniper. But we spent a ton of time designing and redesigning the zombie characters to get them right, because in the original *PVZ* they're all kind of one-dimensional – they only do one thing."



Brian Lindley is the producer on *Garden Warfare*, and has previously headed up the teams behind *Need For Speed: The Run* and the *Skate* series

Not any more. PopCap's persistence has resulted in a roughly analogous – albeit rifle-wielding – undead opposition, with just enough asymmetry to make picking a side interesting. The Foot Soldier, for example, carries the rapid-fire Z1 Assault Blaster into battle, but can also fire zombie-propelled grenades from the bazooka on his back and release a zombie stink cloud to cover his movements. The Scientist, meanwhile, is the undead equivalent of the Sunflower; he can drop purple-goo-spurting healing stations, but he's also capable of warping a short distance to confuse and outmanoeuvre foes. The zombie force is rounded out by both the fast-moving Engineer, who can counter burrowed Chompers with his pneumatic drill as well as launch his own drone, and the All-Star, a zombie in American football gear, which can shoulder-barge enemies and throw suicide bomber imps into the mix.



The zombie Scientist might seem weak at first, but his weapon is best at close range. Combined with his ability to teleport short distances, he becomes deadly in able hands



PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE



In his Marine Biologist guise, the Scientist exchanges his Zomboss Goo Blaster for a mammalian variation on a shotgun: a dolphin that projectile vomits fish guts

It's all suitably chaotic at first glance. But like its source material, apparently disparate munitions work best in concert. And even though player abilities will be customisable in the finished game, we found PopCap's fairly rigidly defined class structures encouraged team play from the off during a 24-player Team Vanquish match on a server populated entirely by strangers.

"A lot of action games out there now encourage that lone-wolf mentality," Lindley says, "but the way we've designed our characters, you need to play with your team. You can lone wolf if you need, and survive on your own, but you're going to be strongest if you've got a teammate or two next to you."

Variants for each character will allow for greater specialisation within your team. For instance, the Ice Cactus can freeze enemies in place after landing a few consecutive shots, making it easier to mop up the rest of a health bar, while the Foot Soldier can become a Camo Ranger that does slightly less damage but is more effective at longer range. The plants also sport rooted abilities that increase the potency of their weapons – a Peashooter, for instance, becomes a Gatling gun – at the cost of being unable to move for a short time.

> ***"We don't want to make any compromises in the gameplay for 360. We're still optimising"***

Garden Warfare's rich colours, cartoonish art style and frenetic pace instantly bring to mind *Team Fortress 2*, but there are plenty of other touchstones here. The studio, formerly known as EA Black Box, has worked on a broad range of projects in the past and is more than happy to acknowledge its influences. *Battlefield*'s Commander mode, for example, inspired *Garden Warfare*'s Boss mode, in which players can use Kinect or SmartGlass to control a tactical map as either Crazy Dave or Dr Zomboss. You can drop supply crates, deploy NPC reinforcements and provide suppressing fire, but your craft (a modified RV or ominous blimp) can be spotted by, and is vulnerable to, ground forces. If you're shot down, the role will be opened up to other players.

"We looked at all of the popular shooters out there that we love to play ourselves," Lindley says. "*Battlefield*'s a huge inspiration for us – what they do is really a foundation that we mess around with to create the game we're making. Obviously *Call Of Duty*, *Halo*: all of these games influenced *Garden Warfare* in different ways. We've taken ideas and mechanics from those and sprinkled them in among our own to give a familiar feel, but in a world that's a bit more lighthearted and different from what saturates the market."

It certainly feels different, but at this stage it's difficult to assess whether it can surpass its contemporaries or merely ape them. While the audio design is hefty enough, we found ourselves losing track of what was happening as the screen filled with extravagant particle and lighting effects. Of more concern are the slightly loose-feeling controls, which work fine when navigating maps, but feel a touch too jittery when it comes to aiming. Much of the action takes place in close proximity, admittedly, but hopefully this aspect will be addressed before launch in February.

Even so, the map we try – a town centre with adjoining parkland – feels both well-populated and tightly designed, offering plenty of shortcuts and hiding places. It all looks fantastic, too, the chunky art style managing to evoke the series' 2D visuals while allowing *Garden Warfare* its own flourishes. It won't look quite so beautiful on 360, of course, but PopCap is aiming to retain the 24 player count for its Team Vanquish mode.

"That's our goal, absolutely," Lindley says. "We don't want to make any compromises in the gameplay for 360. We're still working on optimising and all that stuff, but right now we're tracking towards being able to have the same number of players on both sides for both 360 and One."

While *Garden Warfare* is launching exclusively on Xbox consoles, PopCap has no intention of limiting itself to a single brand. There is a PC version in the works, and the team is keeping its options open. Lindley: "We want to get this game into as many people's hands as possible. Draw whatever conclusion from that statement that you will." ■



The build we played didn't feature a full selection of costume options, but even so there was plenty of opportunity to stand out



Ground frost

Garden Warfare demonstrates a playful side to DICE's Frostbite engine that we haven't seen before, filling the screen with vibrant hues and exaggerated characters. PopCap has achieved a full 60fps at 1080p, too. "Frostbite is super powerful with a lot of features," Lindley says. "We didn't have to make any major changes to the way the engine works to hit the visual style we wanted; it was just more about developing our content to hit the direction we wanted to go and using the right features of Frostbite to make it look awesome. We pretty much got everything we need out of the box with that engine, which saved us a lot of time on engineering and allowed us to focus on gameplay."

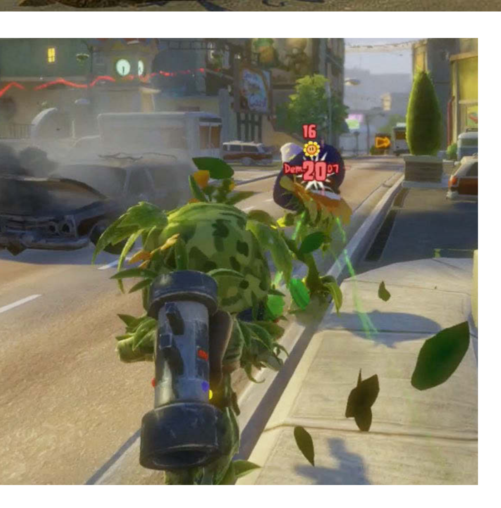








TOP LEFT **Weapon effects are exemplary throughout, with plasma, gloop and laser beams lighting up maps. Smoke and dust effects are also excellent, lingering for a luxuriously long time.**
TOP RIGHT **This Welder Engineer has become the unfortunate victim of a Spike Weed, a trap laid down by the Chomper that ensnares zombies for a couple of seconds, dealing damage while it maintains its grip.**
LEFT **Both sides' drones are pictured here, each armed with a rapid-fire gun and the ability to call in airstrikes. The corn and zombomb strikes are functionally identical, however**





LEFT **Things can quickly get chaotic onscreen. Here, a Sunflower is healing an ally (via the yellow beam emanating from its back) while firing on zombies**



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"As a developer, you dream about how video game hardware could be better. More powerful but also easier to use. Lots of memory to support rich interactive worlds, and lots of horsepower for detailed graphics and high frame rates. We worked hard to make this dream into reality with PlayStation 4.

As a game creator myself, it's been wonderful to use that next-generation power to create a game title – a game with a unique hero. He's a living, breathing character built out of five thousand parts driven by a custom physics simulation. ***That's Knack."***

MARK CERNY. LEAD ARCHITECT PS4 AND DIRECTOR OF KNACK

NEXT-GEN POWER

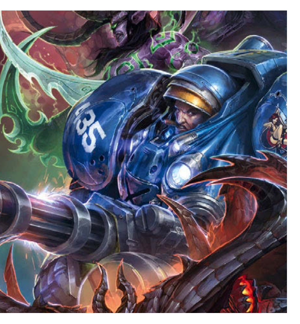
The PS4 enables game developers to unlock their creativity and push the boundaries of play through a system that is tuned specifically to their needs. It is centred around a custom chip that contains a 1.84 TFLOPS graphics processor with 8GB of ultra-fast GDDR5 unified system memory, easing game creation and increasing the richness of content achievable on the platform.

GAMER FOCUSED. DEVELOPER INSPIRED.



Publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin US
Release TBA





***StarCraft II*'s Jim Raynor is Blizzard's recommended character for new players. His abilities tend to focus on keeping enemies at a distance and his ultimate heroic power can allow for relatively safe lane-pushing**

HEROES OF THE STORM

In Blizzard's MOBA rework, you're only as good as your team

Hesitation isn't something we tend to associate with Blizzard. The creator of *Warcraft* is known for slow but decisive development, the end result of which is almost invariably comprehensive, polished, genre-defining games. *Heroes Of The Storm* is something of an edge case, though. It's the most publicly iterated game the developer has ever produced, appearing at three successive BlizzCon events in different forms and under different names. It has been *Blizzard DOTA*, *Blizzard All-Stars*, and now – somewhat confusingly – it's called *Heroes Of The Storm*. Blizzard would like you to call it *Heroes*.

It'd also like you to remember that the original *Defense Of The Ancients* was a mod for *Warcraft III*. It'd like you to remember that this vastly popular and hugely lucrative genre is grounded in a merging of realtime strategy and RPG mechanics that it pioneered. The language used to frame the game, both at BlizzCon and since, is loaded with challenges to Blizzard's wayward children.

"These other games are about making superstars: there's the one guy who gets to do everything and be really cool and powerful," says producer **Kaeo Milker**. "We're looking at how each player can take a meaningful part in their team's advancement."

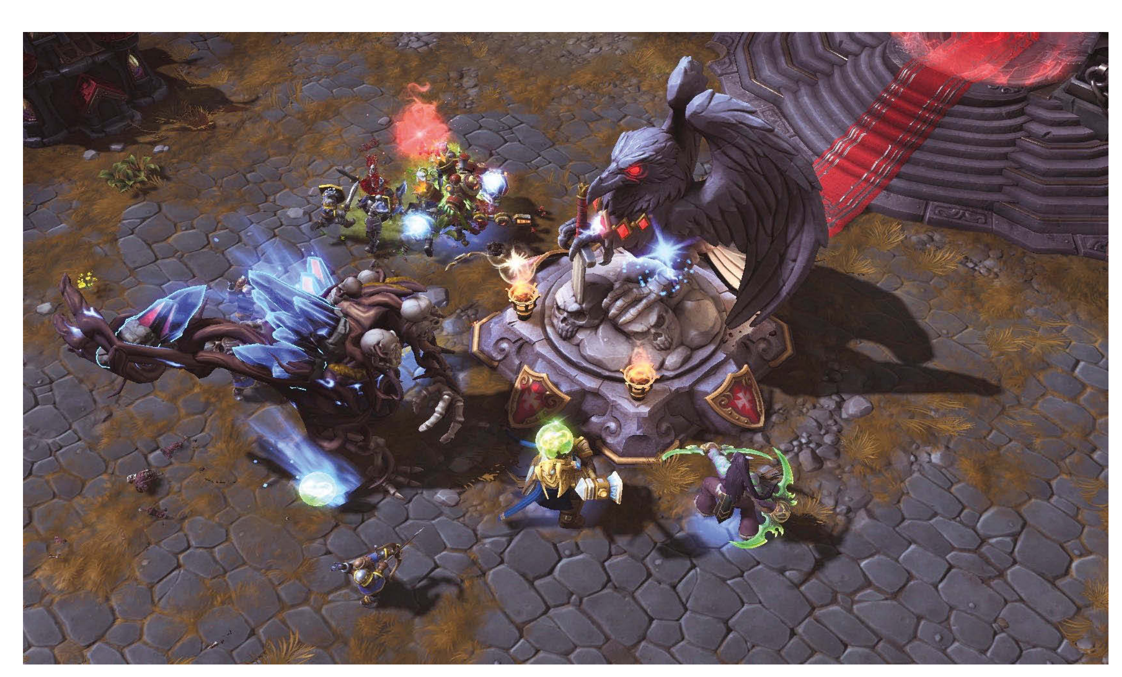
A roster of star Blizzard characters will join forces for this friendly, group-minded approach. Players can choose to be Assassins, such as *StarCraft*'s Nova, a sniper with passive invisibility and a long-range skill shot. They can play as durable melee warriors, such as *Diablo*'s archangel Tyrael, or support healers, whose ranks include *Warcraft*'s Malfurion Stormrage. Specialist characters like *Diablo III*'s Witch Doctor have control abilities that allow them to push lanes and manipulate the

As in other games of this type, the objective is still to destroy a single key building in the centre of the enemy base. Distinct to *Heroes Of The Storm*, however, are the dynamic map objectives that determine overall strategies





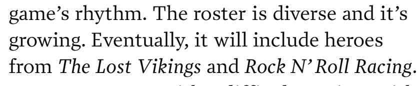
ABOVE CENTRE **Customisable heroic abilities allow players to shift their approach mid-game, a system that's clearly aimed at genre newcomers.** ABOVE **Delivering coins to Captain Blackheart buys his allegiance, so setting up ambushes around his base is a viable strategy**







LEFT **Diablo's damage blast ability is taken directly from *Diablo III*'s final encounter. As in that game, it's possible to dodge it if you're quick. Skill-based abilities like this are a way for players to distinguish themselves**



game's rhythm. The roster is diverse and it's growing. Eventually, it will include heroes from *The Lost Vikings* and *Rock N' Roll Racing*.

Heroes come with a difficulty rating, with warnings attached to characters who demand highly skilled play. These include Abathur (see 'Intelligent design') and *Warcraft* villain Illidan, whose damage output is based on comboing regular auto-attacks with a range of special moves. He'll be a more natural fit for players used to *League Of Legends* or *Dota 2*.

In pursuit of a more accessible, equitable and focused MOBA, Blizzard has taken the genre apart. Earning gold to purchase items and enhance a character is gone. Competing for last hits against lane creeps is gone. Hunting neutral creeps as we know it is gone. Even the concept of individual power levels has been stripped away. In *Heroes*, players

In pursuit of a more equitable and focused MOBA, Blizzard has taken the genre apart

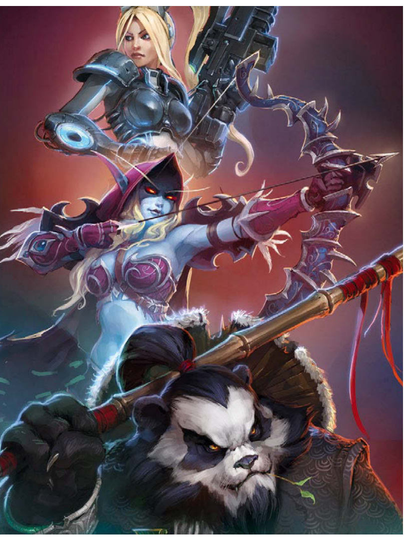
don't have levels, but teams do. If one player earns experience, his whole team reaps the benefit. It's impossible for new players to fall behind, or for a single superstar to emerge who carries his team to victory.

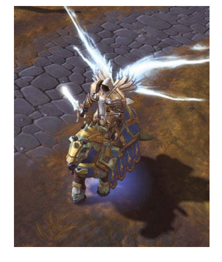
This approach has left a hole in the game. Blizzard has had to find another means of providing players with a way to pull ahead, because MOBAs are ultimately predicated on imbalance, on a steadily building power differential between players that eventually becomes unstoppable. In *Heroes Of The Storm*, dynamic objectives give players something to work towards. In the Cursed Hollow map, an item called a Tribute spawns at a random location at regular intervals. The team that claims three of these items earns the favour of a capricious Raven Lord, landing a huge debuff on the enemy team. In Blackheart's Bay, coins can be gathered from treasure chests or looted from monsters in order to pay off a ghostly pirate at the map's centre. When this happens, he turns his cannon on enemy buildings.

It's a system that works well because, unlike *Dota 2*, *Heroes* endeavours to be clear about what is happening and why at any given time. An alert that the enemy is gathering Tribute is a natural call to arms, creating team battle scenarios without requiring an understanding of game economics, power curves, or match phases.

The game will be free to play, with purchasable alternative costumes and skins for in-game mounts. An account-wide levelling system will be used to steadily unlock characters, and Blizzard plans to use this to gate the difficulty of the game and more accurately match players of similar skill.

Time spent playing *Heroes Of The Storm* reveals a game that is – despite its back-and-forth development process – confident in its overhaul of a genre currently characterised by complexity and hostility. Blizzard is approaching the MOBA as a problem that it has the expertise, resources and time to solve. Players who believe that the MOBA is fine as it is might find something objectionable in that attitude, but they may also find, with time, that there's beauty in simplicity. ■



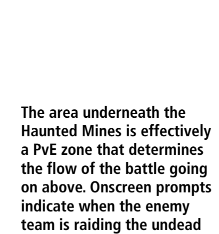


Intelligent design

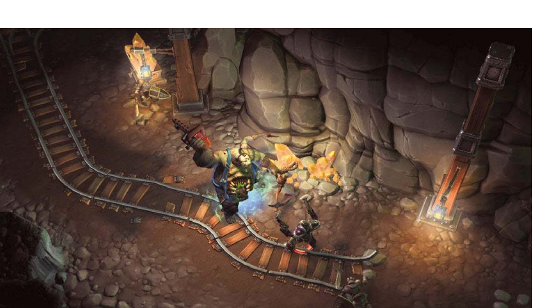
Heroes' more forgiving character design hasn't stopped Blizzard from shaking up the formula. In *StarCraft II: Heart Of The Swarm*, Abathur oversaw Kerrigan's evolution pits; in *Heroes*, he's a specialist that can support his team without ever setting foot in a lane. Abathur's passive ability augments the nearest lane with upgradable Zerg units. He can also lay explosive organic mines anywhere his team can see, and symbiotically attach himself to any ally or building. He then uses their body as a platform to deploy shields, fire projectiles and trigger AOE damage. Playing him well requires both map awareness and a broad knowledge of the game.

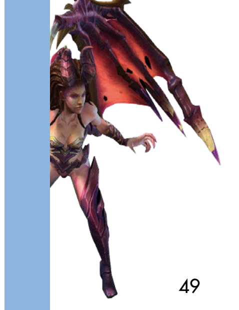


Kaeo Milker, producer, *Heroes Of The Storm*



The area underneath the Haunted Mines is effectively a PvE zone that determines the flow of the battle going on above. Onscreen prompts indicate when the enemy team is raiding the undead below, giving the other team a chance to respond

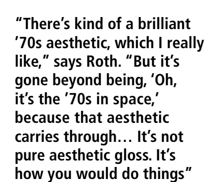








Publisher/developer Simon Roth
Format PC
Origin UK
Release December 2013 (Early Access)



"There's kind of a brilliant '70s aesthetic, which I really like," says Roth. "But it's gone beyond being, 'Oh, it's the '70s in space,' because that aesthetic carries through… It's not pure aesthetic gloss. It's how you would do things"

MAIA

Mining deep into a sim with planet-sized ambition

Dungeon Keeper meets *Dwarf Fortress* in space is one hell of an elevator pitch. But while it's common to find such descriptions attached to glimpses of **Simon Roth**'s *Maia*, the game is as inimical to easy comparisons as the eponymous planet's atmosphere is to the hapless colonists attempting to settle on its surface.

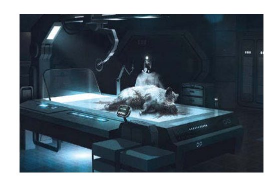
Roth happily lists the Bullfrog strategy classic and Tarn Adams' roguelike among his laundry list of inspirations, but makes it clear that's as far as it goes. "It's not either [game], and I don't think it's fair to say it's either when people describe it," he tells us. "There are obvious nods to those games, because they have inspired it, but I'm being careful not just to take the language of those games or the ideas of those games and plonk them in. Like, I'm inspired by them, so I'm putting in these little jokes…"

Those jokes include IMP worker robots, which mine out cubes of rock for you to then zone off as different rooms, and chickens that will gather in livestock pens to be a handy source of protein for your spacefarers. Perhaps it's easy to see how people became confused.

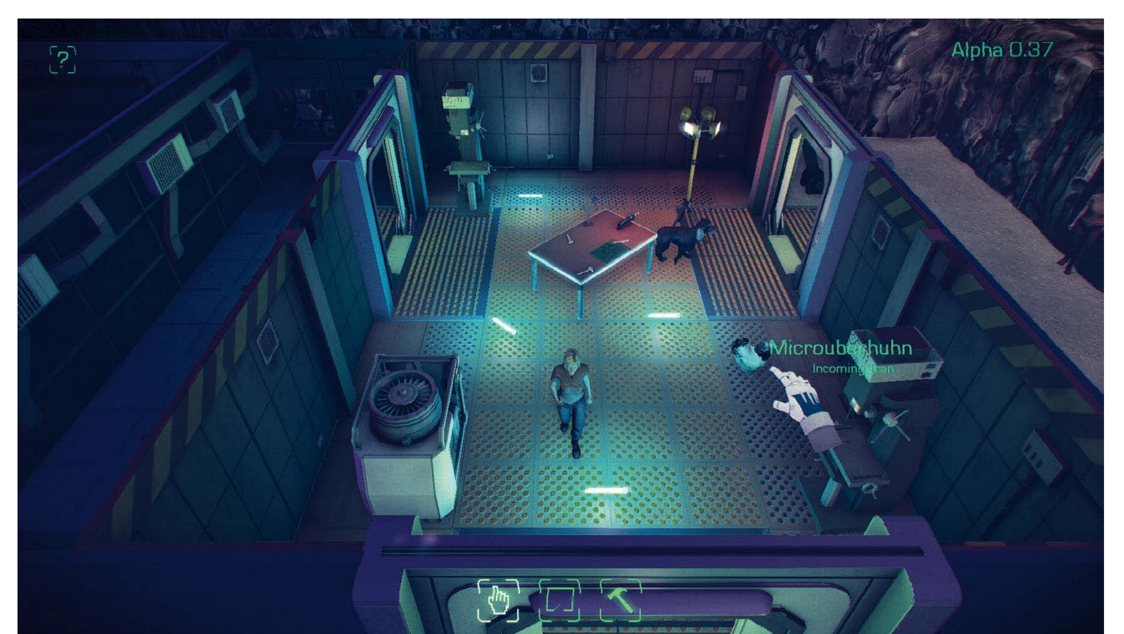
So what is *Maia*? It's a hard sci-fi simulation game – emphasis on the hard – shot through with a very British sense of humour. Put another way, *Maia* presents players with a meticulously researched and intricately modelled primordial exoplanet that their colonists must tame lest they perish upon its uncaring surface. The air outside is deadly, the plants are borderline inedible, and some of the not-yet-implemented local fauna will see your clutch of humans as a rare delicacy. So you'll need to build a fragile base inside a mountain as you strive towards self-sufficiency. In the planned eight-hour

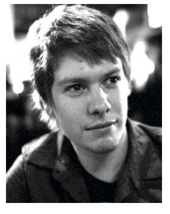
Glow sticks play a bigger role than mere illumination: colonists' moods and work efficiency are affected by different colours of light. Red makes them work faster but feel more aggressive, while blue light is soothing





ABOVE CENTRE **Flags fly fluidly in the wind, thanks to a dynamic cloth sim, but they're upside down. This is for a reason: it's a sign of intense distress.** ABOVE **Dissection concept art gives a hint about the kind of creatures you'll encounter**



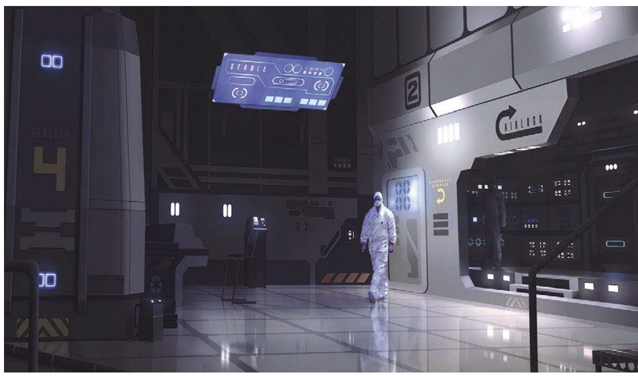


Creator Simon Roth





LEFT **Lava is among the list of things not in the current alpha build. Roth promises layers of earth to mine down into, with the molten rock becoming a problem the deeper you go. But if you can cool it, magma becomes a source of rare minerals**



TOP **Roth is keen to keep the interface minimal, which means no popups or blatant hints. Instead every system relays its status visually and/or audibly, so damaged reactors might smoke, or turbine blades grind.** ABOVE **Concept art of the radiation containment room depicts a colonist in a clean suit, but we're told that costume change has been scrapped for the sake of keeping *Maia* manageable**

campaign mode, you'll also work towards a technological marvel that promises to make this harsh environment a lot more habitable.

Yet for all its civic-planning trappings, this simulated world draws as much from *The Sims* as *SimCity*. Your colonists are far from worker drones, each with their own personality and goals. "The problem with the colonists is they have their own free-will system," Roth says. "It's a lot like what they did on *The Sims 2*, I believe, where they assess everything in the world that they can see and learn what different objects can give them or do for them. I'm kind of taking it to a much higher level, with abstract wants and needs that they try to fulfil, with strange vagaries. They kind of build relationships with objects." That extends to the chickens and dogs, too, which may decide to fall out with each other, or take an intense dislike to a particular colonist.

It's just one of a staggering number of complex systems that underpin Roth's world. Take wind turbines, which you'll build on the hostile open plains to meet your power needs. Rather than simply topping up an onscreen bar with a block of a generic power resource, on mouseover they reveal a fluctuating output in watts that's been calculated from the current windspeed and the size of their blades. Elsewhere, foliage grows in realtime; solar panels track the sun; and any research you do is stored on tape decks, meaning your data can be lost if they're broken. The level of detail is astonishing, but Roth is resisting feature creep. "A lot of the *Dwarf Fortress* fans are going, 'You should simulate every tooth in the characters' mouths.' But I'm not putting in detail for detail's sake. It has to either feel like a nice bit of polish, or it has to be something that directly influences the gameplay."

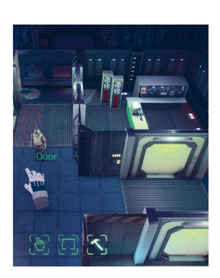
At this current alpha stage, however, all those raw simulations have yet to coalesce into objectives or any sense of a defined end point. Roth admits that's due to the nature of what he's building. "With a simulation game,

> ***"Having seen Godus, I think people have been very bad at reacting to expectations"***

there's no concept of a vertical slice. I can't say, 'Here's the little gameplay demo.'"

Not a problem, perhaps, except that the game launched on Steam Early Access early this month. With plenty of Kickstarter funds still in the bank, we wonder why. "This game will suit it," Roth explains. "It was always going to be an extended alpha kind of game. I think a lot of people [have] failed on the Early Access route because they think that releases should be perfect, and they think that they should happen every milestone, and they have very rigid structures. Having seen *Godus*, and a few other games, I think people have been very bad at reacting to expectations and managing people's expectations of what they should have."

Let's set those expectations, then: what *Maia* offers right now is an uncommonly ambitious sandbox full of toys and discoveries to make. It's an unformed, unstable and buggy landscape dotted with spots of intense polish, but that shouldn't put off the pioneering spirits at which it is so clearly aimed. ■



Mostly harmless?

"I do love my Douglas Adams," Roth admits. We'll say he does. The spirit of The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy author oozes from *Maia*, but most notably in the game's self-satisfied doors. The mouseover text for these often runs along smug lines, but it's procedurally generated, and can throw up surprises. "They sometimes come out not funny and sometimes they come out incredibly offensive. There's no real way to rein it back, but people are like, 'It doesn't matter; it's hilarious.' Although we were at Minecon and little kids were playing it… and some of the jokes about lubrication and stuff were pushing the boundaries."



Publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin US
Release TBA



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WARLORDS OF DRAENOR

Rolling back the clock to reinvigorate a legend

With *Mists Of Pandaria*, Blizzard expanded *World Of Warcraft* to the point where it encompassed every continent and otherworldly territory referenced in the trilogy of strategy games that preceded it. Azeroth is, in a word, done, but the work of expanding the world's most enduringly popular MMOG is not.

Blizzard's pitch for *Warlords Of Draenor* is rather conservative. The expansion adds a new continent and extends the level cap, but there are no new races or classes. Instead, all of the original *WOW* races will be receiving a visual upgrade, part of an extensive reworking of the game's engine that suggests Blizzard is thinking about the future, but is doing so, tellingly, by looking at the past.

Producer John Lagrave

In *WOW*'s 5.4 patch, players defeated rogue Horde chief Garrosh Hellscream and dragged him away to answer for his crimes. In the events leading up to *Warlords*, he'll escape and, with the help of a time-travelling ally, head to the orc homeworld of Draenor in the years before the events of *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. His mission: to prevent the orcs from becoming corrupted and invading Azeroth. Then he plans to shape them into his own Iron Horde and invade Azeroth anyway.

It's not the first time *WOW* has dabbled in time travel, but instead of revisiting battles from the books or strategy games, *Warlords Of Draenor* is a full alternative history. Players will visit seven new zones on Draenor before it was destroyed and became Outlands. While the continent roughly maps onto territory from *The Burning Crusade*, it's all new and substantially more varied. The Horde will begin in Frostfire Ridge, a range of snowbound mountains in the north. The Alliance begins by assisting the besieged Draenei in Shadowmoon Valley, a landscape of rolling hills where it is always night.

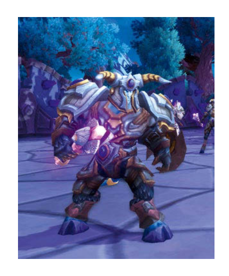
The expansion has a brutal, low-fantasy look that seems like a response to critics who felt that *World Of Warcraft* had lost its way with *Mists Of Pandaria*. It is explicitly billed as a return to the themes of *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, a reboot of sorts that allows Blizzard to double down on the appeal of characters who have been around for almost 19 years. Characters such as Durotan, Ner'zhul and Grom Hellscream return as the chieftains of diverse orc clans that players will interact with, and run errands for, over the course of the journey from level 90 to 100.

Mists Of Pandaria's farm system, which worked a little like *Animal Crossing*, has been expanded into a full-blown town management minigame called the Garrison. Players will be able to claim land, upgrade a small town and recruit NPC craftsmen and adventurers to go on missions in real time. Your settlement will be incorporated into the environment seamlessly via phasing, but you'll need to offer a friend an invite before they can visit.

It is billed as a return to the themes of Warcraft: Orcs & Humans, a reboot of sorts

Blizzard will be overhauling a wide range of *WOW*'s underlying systems. The inventory is set for an overhaul, incorporating filters to make items easier to manage. Legacy stats such as Hit and Expertise are gone, replaced by more visible and entertaining upgrade paths that unlock, for example, the ability for regular melee attacks to hit enemies in a small area of effect.

"Blizzard is more than willing to take whole systems that are completely designed and throw them away," stresses producer **John Lagrave**, describing the internal critical process that leads to the development of each new expansion as "brutal". That said, there's something safe-feeling about *WOW*'s new direction, and this conservative tone may not be enough to arrest the game's slide in monthly subscriber numbers. ■



Booster shots

Warlords Of Draenor extends *WOW*'s level cap to 100, and players will need to be level 90 to play any of the new content. In order to make this easier for new and returning players, Blizzard will provide a one-off boost to level 90 for anyone who buys the expansion. The boost is usable once on any of a player's characters, and will also provide them with a full set of level-appropriate equipment and other helpful items. In order to ease the transition into the game proper, *Warlords Of Draenor*'s opening sequence – a 'suicide mission' into orc territory – will also operate as a refresher course in *WOW*'s basic mechanics. Finally, there will be a solo training mode that's designed to help new players get ready for dungeon play.



ABOVE This expansion includes a return to Upper Blackrock Spire, one of vanilla *WOW*'s oldest dungeons. Here, it's being modernised as part of Blizzard's ongoing plan to bring the game's oldest content up to standard

ABOVE ***Warlords Of Draenor*** focuses on the orcs, but the Draenei haven't been forgotten. Their holy site of Auchindoun – ruined in ***The Burning Crusade*** – will be intact and act as a dungeon. RIGHT The Alliance's Draenor campaign begins with the hasty defence of a temple in Shadowmoon Valley. Quests include killing flamethrower-wielding orc minibosses and dislodging grappling hooks before invaders scale walls



ROUND-UP

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** Monolith **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2014



It may have perhaps the least inspiring title of any 2014 game yet announced, but Monolith's Tolkien tie-in has plenty else to pique our interest. Most intriguing is the Nemesis system: every enemy in the game has a name, and if they should survive a encounter with protagonist Talion, they will continue to move around Mordor, levelling up and leaving their mark on the world. Just like you. *Shadow Of Mordor* is set between the events of The Hobbit and The Lord Of The Rings, and Monolith is working with Peter Jackson and Weta Workshop to ensure a coherent visual style, though the story itself isn't to be considered canon.

JAZZPUNK

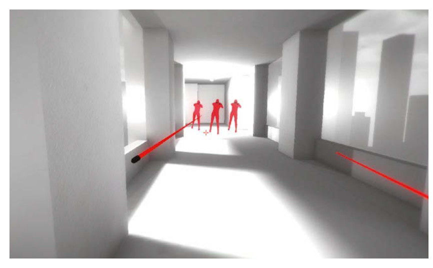
Publisher/developer Necrophone Games **Format** PC **Origin** Canada **Release** Early 2014



The two-level IGF build of Necrophone's comedy adventure, which owes a clear debt to Blendo Games, packs in more gags than many full games. The studio nods to screwball comedies such as Airplane! and Hot Shots, but it's the setting – an alternate Cold War world populated by robots – and videogame tropes that supply the best jokes. A robo-hooker asks: "Am I Turing you on?" while one mission ends with a wall emblazoned with the words "Thing Complete".

SUPERHOT

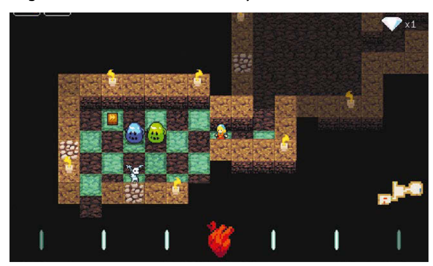
Publisher/developer Blue Brick **Format** PC, browser
Origin Poland **Release** TBC



This creation from August's seven-day FPS jam is now heading for a full release, but *Superhot* is more puzzle game than shooter. Time only moves when you do, making for a game that's far tenser than its leaden pace suggests. The browser version was great; through Oculus Rift, it's remarkable.

CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER

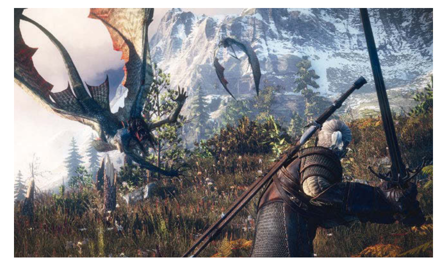
Publisher/developer Brace Yourself Games **Format** PC
Origin Canada **Release** Late 2013 (Early Access)



Roguelike dungeon crawlers are ten a penny, but, as the name suggests, *Crypt Of The NecroDancer* has some tricks up its sleeve. You can only move by pressing an arrow key in time to the pounding electronic soundtrack, while a multiplier that ups your earnings from kills will drop when you miss a beat.

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** CD Projekt Red
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Poland **Release** 2014



When we spoke to CD Projekt Red about its open-world RPG in E255, the studio was cagey about Xbox One and PS4, whose specs had yet to be finalised. It now transpires that Kinect, SmartGlass and DualShock 4's touchpad will all be used, and the studio is also working on 4K display support.

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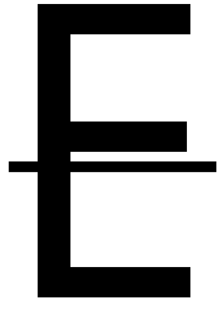
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ATONEMENT



Dark Souls II's overseers explain why this sequel is no less obtuse than its punishing ancestors, despite all of the systems aimed at aiding new players

Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Console release March 2014



ver since co-director Yui Tanimura was quoted using the word 'accessible' in relation to this new entry in the dark fantasy *Souls* series, the teams at developer FromSoftware and publisher Namco Bandai seem to have taken great pride in proving that *Dark Souls II* will be every bit as pad-shatteringly difficult as *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*.

"It was a mistranslation," says producer **Takeshi Miyazoe**. "It's about streamlining, cutting off a lot of fat. That is what we were trying to say, but we used the word 'accessible' in a casual manner, I think."

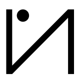
The idea is not to make the game any easier, he says, but to make it less frustrating, especially for series newcomers. That doesn't mean simplifying the combat systems, making boss battles easier, or offering less choice in how you level your character, though, as a recent invite-only network test involving 30,000 players in the new location of Huntsman's Copse proved. No, FromSoftware has more subtle methods in mind.

"*Dark Souls* isn't really a game that's going to hold anybody's hand," says Miyazoe. "But it's not impossible. Just take your time, try to pay attention to the surroundings, be patient and continue to challenge yourself. From a technical standpoint, what we're trying to do is ensure that you understand what mistake you have made. I think the new engine, the new motion [capture], the new visuals – everything that has been enhanced will help the player better understand that."

One way in which FromSoftware intends to achieve a fair balance for new players is through an enhanced Covenant system, which should also facilitate deeper roleplaying. In *Dark Souls*, joining a Covenant brought certain items and benefits, but this time around the groups will have new powers that inform playstyles. Similar to the Darkwraith Covenant in *Dark Souls*, the Brotherhood Of Blood allows its members to invade others' games more easily. But since players in a Hollow state are no longer protected from invasions, other Covenants will play a more defensive role. When invaded, followers of The Way Of Blue will automatically summon phantom assistance from the Blue Sentinel group, for instance. Heirs To The Sun, meanwhile, functions a bit like Warrior Of Sunlight, collecting together a band of co-op-minded players who will be summoned by priority for PvE encounters as well as invasions.

Brotherhood Of Blood and Blue Sentinel apostles can even fight PvP battles within their own Covenants, though details of this system are being kept secret. Gaining superior status among Covenant brethren will result in an aura around the character, though; in the case of Brotherhood Of Blood, this is achieved by a kill streak of invaded hosts or of Blue Sentinels. And those in a fifth Covenant, Bell Keeper, will automatically invade any who wander haplessly into an area of the game where twin bells are located.

Miyazoe hints at one more Covenant that will act as a police force to hunt down serial invaders, adding an element of risk for those who would seek to prey on weaker players. Think of it as a wanted system with a bounty on the heads of griefers.



All of which may not soothe the concerns of *Dark Souls* players who prefer to stay Hollow and avoid PvP encounters altogether, particularly now that your max HP will diminish with each death until you restore your human form with a Human Effigy. Miyazoe is unapologetic. "This is going to sound a little bit rude, but being invaded is part of the game," he says. "It's like an enemy in the game that just happens to be controlled by another player. The Covenants system is a good way to be helped; that's how we want to structure some of the roleplaying as well. So if you're an invader, if you're a bad guy, there always has to be a policeman who tries to get rid of the bad guys, and that element will be blended into the Covenants as well."

Miyazoe – or Tak, as he chooses to introduce himself – grew up in Canada and came to his parents' home country of Japan a decade ago. He speaks with an easy confidence that betrays his western upbringing. We meet him in the huge reception area at Namco Bandai, which has become a winter wonderland. It's decorated with a fake snow scene replete with life-size snowmen, Christmas trees and Pac-Man wearing a Santa hat. With not a pool of blood in sight, the stage is most definitely not set for our demo of *Dark Souls II*, beginning with an exclusive viewing of the opening movie.

The video will be made public in January, and Miyazoe asks us not to spoil anything



Producer Takeshi Miyazoe of Namco Bandai, which is publishing *Dark Souls II* in Europe and America. FromSoftware will publish the game in Japan

SHARED SOULS

The influence of 2011's *Dark Souls* has been felt far and wide, from the inventory retrieval and messaging system of Ubisoft's *ZombiU* to *Journey*'s subtle use of indirect player communication.

"I guess *Journey* may have referenced *Dark Souls* a little bit," says Namco Bandai producer Takeshi Miyazoe. "It was a very successful game in that it was very clear in what it was trying to communicate with the player."

But perhaps the game that bears the most striking resemblance to *Dark Souls* is Capcom's forthcoming PS4 exclusive *Deep Down*, which has a similar fantasy aesthetic.

"I haven't played *Deep Down* yet," says Miyazoe. "I've heard that it's like, 'What is this game really about?' Even if there is something similar, I'm pretty confident the fans will stick with *Dark Souls*."

ABOVE **The Mirror Knight showcases a creative approach to both online play and boss battles, with a magical shield that can summon other real-life players to help defend it**





ABOVE **Members of certain Covenants, such as the Brotherhood Of Blood, can fight for supremacy within their faction. The aura around the right-hand player indicates a high kill streak from invasions**



"AFTER PLAYING IT TEN OR 20 TIMES, YOU'LL MEMORISE THE PATH AND THEN YOU WON'T NEED A TORCH"

specific, but what we see is darkly atmospheric and very much a step up in production values from its predecessor. A witchy old lady holds the camera's gaze with milky cataract eyes and a lonely leafless tree is swarmed by delicately rendered fireflies. It's an intro laden with unsettling effects (a woman's face melts clean off, ghostly skeleton spirits take flight) and an eerie sense of place. A beautifully pitched voiceover tells us of the fate of the cursed while an armoured knight approaches a land of ruins by boat.



The sequence's production values are an indication of the general improvements the game will bring. With its development team roughly doubled, FromSoftware is making the biggest game in the studio's history. It's also easily the most hungrily anticipated, with some 2.5 million fans to please. Working with a budget that is bigger than before but still nowhere near that of a western triple-A release, the studio is nonetheless aiming to create blockbuster entertainment that looks and plays the part. In order to meet that vision, production has been spilt in two, with battle mechanics and gameplay directed by Tanimura, and Tomohiro Shibuya in charge of world and design. But the pair are apparently being overseen "closely" by series creator Hidetaka Miyazaki – in contrast to the picture we were given last year.

Character animations are now motion captured, giving a more natural fluidity, while an increase in lighting sources made possible by a new bespoke engine means illumination plays a bigger role in the game. The player and some enemies carry fiery torches with custom mobile lighting effects, and this in turn has given the team a merry excuse to create caves and other interior areas that are plunged wholly into darkness.

Fan feedback from the beta was overwhelmingly positive, yet the darkness of the woods was a common complaint – not only because players wanted to relish the series' glorious High Gothic environments, but also because it makes progress harder. You can carry a torch in your left hand, lit from a bonfire (the series' sanctuary for restoring health and levelling up) but extinguished when unequipped, or you can carry a shield for protection. Choose.

"I don't think that we're going to make it any brighter, but we do understand that there are dark areas," Miyazoe says. "The cave is pretty much pitch black if you don't have a torch, but that's part of the gameplay as well. After playing it ten or 20 times, you'll start to memorise how the path goes and then you won't need a torch."

And if fear over *Dark Souls II*'s accessibility got the better of you, just ask Miyazoe what to do if you find yourself torchless in a deep, dark place far from a bonfire. "Um, you'll die?" he laughs. "There will be critical moments where you are forced to choose between the shield's protection or vision, but there are other gimmicks when you know the way. There's a stone object, which doesn't have a name yet, but it's a big stone face on the wall. You place an object in its mouth and it might trigger some lights to go on. So if you find yourself in the dark for hours and hours, there's probably something you're missing."

Indeed, one subtle yet vital shift in *Dark Souls II* is towards puzzle-based level design, as glimpsed in the network beta by the tantalising placement of a bonfire behind a locked gate – a safe haven so close and yet seemingly impossible to reach.

"We want to encourage players to explore and find things for themselves," Miyazoe says. "In the beta build, the first and second bonfires were pretty easy to find, but the third one was behind a closed gate, and you can only get in from the top; you have to jump down off a ledge to the bonfire and then flick a lever to open the gate up. That sort of thing is playing with the players' minds a little bit, in the sense that you can see the bonfire there and if you want to go to the trouble of figuring out how to get in, it's up to you."



Hidetaka Miyazaki no longer leads the *Souls* franchise as director, but he is supervising the game's production



"WE CRANKED UP THE DIFFICULTY BUT WE'RE STILL DEBATING WHETHER IT'S TOO HARD OR TOO EASY"

DIE FRIEND CHAT

Though *Dark Souls II* benefits from a jump in visual quality and enemy AI, Miyazoe says the game was never mooted for newer hardware, not least because the development cost and time required would have set back the release date significantly. And while the franchise has made innovative use of connectivity features so far, the new consoles' reliance on social systems might shatter the sense of immersion.

"You're in this land and you're all alone; it's cold, it's dark, it's miserable, it's lonely; you barely see any hope, but you're still struggling to find that light," Miyazoe says. "You do have other people who are in the same world and are facing the same difficulties, but as soon as you start to chat with other people, it breaks the world itself."

Miyazoe demonstrates this in the beta by walking to that area and attempting the jump, missing and falling to his death. Nobody ever said the puzzles will be easy to solve, after all.

Boss battles, too, look as if they will be adopting new angles in *Dark Souls II*. The team has gone to great lengths to avoid spoiling the majority of these, but the bosses seen so far – the Skeleton Lord, which plays out more like fighting a horde of skeletons; Mirror Knight, which can summon networked players to attack you through its mirror shield; and the Executioner's Chariot, a hide-and-seek encounter with a barrelling two-headed horse and cart – give an idea of what to expect. Miyazoe says that these are mid-level bosses and that *Dark Souls II*'s biggest monsters will not necessarily be bigger than those in *Dark Souls*, just more interesting in terms of design and fighting styles.

The network beta was held primarily to test the load on servers. The online aspects of *Dark Souls* – PvP invasions and player messaging functions – were handled through P2P connections, but *Dark Souls II* will have dedicated servers, allowing for a more reliable and richer experience. Miyazoe says that the results of the test proved that Namco Bandai's Japan-based servers have plenty of capacity, though it will likely set up local servers in Europe and North America as well. The beta also provided a wealth of other data and fan feedback useful for balancing, and the game's final month or so of full production, through to mid- or late December, has been spent tweaking the systems highlighted.

Another area of concern for some fans who played the network test was the framerate, which was a downright disaster in some areas of the previous game and still seemed choppy on occasion in the beta. Miyazoe insists this will be fixed at 30fps on PS3 and 360, and maybe a little higher on PC, by release. Careful observers also noticed a smattering of low-res textures, particularly on the ground but also some walls and clothing elements. These will be fixed as far as possible, but Miyazoe says they're not a top priority. "If it's far in the distance, we might just leave it," he says. "If it's very crucial to the gameplay, we will definitely fix it. The visuals have improved a lot from *Dark Souls*, and we want to capitalise on that."

Balancing is a concern, however. A new system revealed in the beta is that your health bar gets a boost when your blood messages are rated by other players, but the exact amount of energy needs to be finalised, as Tanimura feels it made the beta too easy. Then again, with 30,000 players in the same game location at the same time, it was probably an exceptional circumstance.

"The other thing is that in the last round of network testing we cranked up the difficulty of the enemies," Miyazoe says. "Tanimura and I feel that [those harder enemies got] closer to the difficulty level that we want. But we're still debating whether it's too hard or too easy."

No one wants *Dark Souls II* to be easy. The trial-by-fire nature of these adventures is what makes them memorable. Errors are greeted with death, and you quickly learn not to make the same mistake twice. But those systems could be better expressed. Short, clipped dialogue boxes did a terrible job of explaining things in past games, and this is an area that FromSoftware will address in the sequel – to a degree.

"We want players to try to figure it out," Miyazoe says. "How to jump, how to roll or how to swing a weapon will be taught through the tutorial, but trying to experiment is what will remain for *Dark Souls II*. The UI will be more usable, but the concept of trying things for yourself and realising that you can do something new is part of the experience.

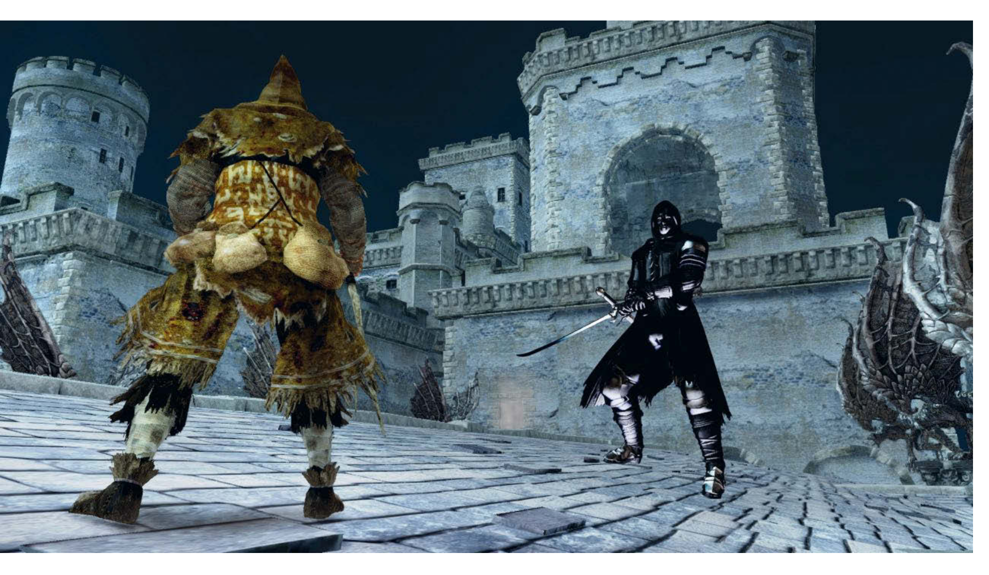
"If you think an item seems useful, try to use it. If it doesn't work and there are very limited numbers…" Miyazoe pauses to deliver a smile filled with mischief. "Well, that's a chance you took."



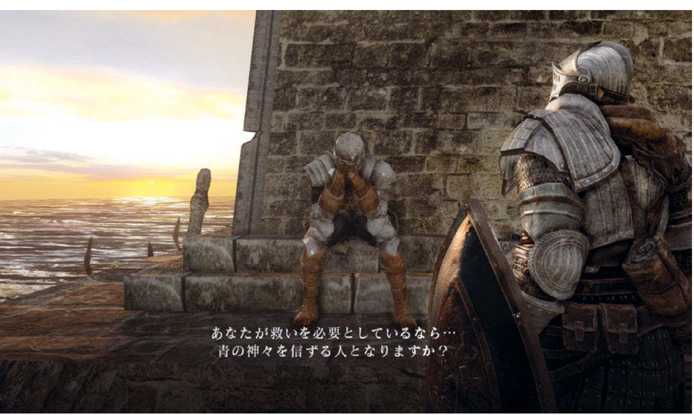
The game's art style continues the established dark fantasy theme, providing no shortage of vicious-looking items



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LEFT Disciples of the Bell Keeper Covenant will be called on to invade players who reach a location where the Twin Bells are kept. BELOW Die as a Hollow and you'll lose a bit of your health bar – the studio's solution to make human form more attractive







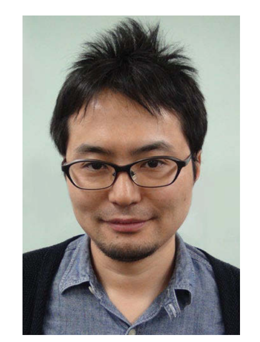
ABOVE LEFT As before, Covenants can be joined through encounters with NPCs, which should appear fairly early in the game. LEFT The timing required to pull off attacks and defensive moves has been tweaked since *Dark Souls*, though the concept of waiting for the opportune moment to strike remains

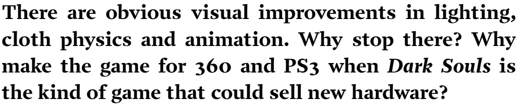


Q&A: YUI TANIMURA

Co director, Dark Souls II

When we met last year, you spoke of making *Dark Souls II* more accessible than the first game. Since then, it's become clear that this is very much a *Souls* game. What did you mean by 'accessible', and how have you balanced the desire to attract new players with the need to keep existing fans happy?
First of all, we apologise for using the word 'accessible' and misleading the fans. By 'accessible', what we mainly meant was going through the process of streamlining and carving away the fat to more clearly communicate the true essence of *Dark Souls*. There are two main concepts we concentrate on when developing. One is the sense of satisfaction when overcoming the hurdles and challenges in the game. We aim for players to achieve a huge sense of satisfaction as they proceed through the game – for the highest sense of achievement possible, we make the game challenging. Second is the loose connections with other players in the same world. This is done through elements such as blood messaging, blood stains, summoning and invasions, [providing] a sense of the other players who suffer the same experiences in the *Dark Souls* universe. Our main intent for *Dark Souls II* was to enhance the experience to better express these underlining concepts more directly to the players, and to cut away a lot of the tediousness that was included in *Dark Souls* that did not have to do with the communication of these concepts.





There are obvious visual improvements in lighting, cloth physics and animation. Why stop there? Why make the game for 360 and PS3 when *Dark Souls* is the kind of game that could sell new hardware?
At the start of development, we felt that there was still a lot of potential that remained unused in *Dark Souls*. I hope this can be seen with the demos and footage that we have released. Our intention was to capitalise on the total potential of [seventh-generation] consoles and deliver the game to fans as soon as possible.

The PC version of the first *Dark Souls* wasn't a good port. How did that make the team feel, and what are you doing to ensure that the PC iteration is better this time around?
We understand and accept a lot of the feedback we have received from fans around the world who have played the PC version. We first decided to port over to the PC platform as a result of the petition signed by players around the world. And with our goal to release a PC version as soon as possible, it was a decision to simply port the experience over in the shortest amount of time possible. For the PC version of *Dark Souls II*, the game development will be based on the PC – we will make sure that the main PC game features are supported and also do our best to attend to a lot of the user feedback that we have received.

What would it take to bring the PC version of *Dark Souls II* to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One?
We have not put any thought into this yet, so I unfortunately can't answer at this point.

Miyazaki isn't directing. Has his distance from the project changed the way *Dark Souls II* is developed?
The basic thinking behind how *Dark Souls II* is developed has not changed. Team structures and members have changed a little bit, and we may think a little more together to bring ideas together. But because we are aligned in regards to what has to be communicated with the game, we have not faced any major changes internally. Miyazaki is still involved as a supervisor, and I seek advice when necessary. There are small things here and there [that Mizazaki might not have chosen], perhaps, but whenever we go back to the core elements of the *Dark Souls* experience, I feel that the thinking behind the game development is similar. I do want to state [there are] some differences between *Dark Souls I* and *II*, so I think the players can also look forward to new elements when they pick up the game.

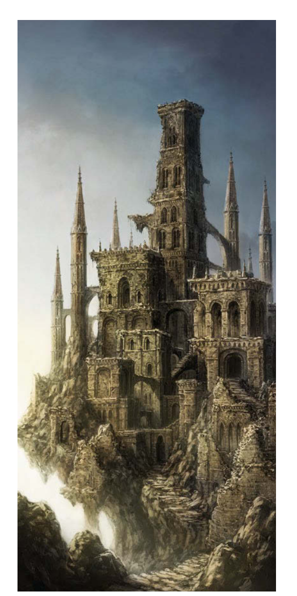
Players can no longer hide from invasions by staying Hollow, and are punished for doing so by having their HP affected by death in this form. How are you balancing this shift in thinking? Being invaded on your way to a boss that you wanted to summon help for is one of *Dark Souls'* most irritating moments and appears to be contradictory to greater accessibility.
First off, my main intention was to have players play with the idea of wanting to stay as a living [human]. [That's]

"WE WANTED PLAYERS TO GRASP ONTO LIFE, AND SENSE THE SORROW AND LONELINESS WHEN PLAYING"



when players immerse themselves more into the character; we wanted players to strive and grasp onto life, and sense the sorrow, remorse and loneliness when playing the game. For this, when players play as a living, we have implemented methods to help the player out, such as The Way Of Blue Covenant and other items that will not make the player completely vulnerable to being invaded. The invaders will also have their risks when invading and so there will be a strategising element for invaders to determine whether they want to invade or not.

What are the biggest challenges in balancing a game of two very different components – PvP interactions that permeate a PvE world? Many of the beta changes seemed to be aimed at tweaking PvP, but is there not a risk that catering for one group of players risks upsetting the others?
For the sake of the network beta test, we wanted to encourage PvP gameplay in order to fully understand the impact on the servers, and also learn patterns of how players around the world play and enjoy the game. The final game will obviously prioritise PvE, but at the same time [it will] make enhancements to the PvP systems.



To what extent is the world shown in the beta the same as the final game? Bonfires and item drops in particular were very generously spaced for player testing. Can you confirm if this will this be the case in the full game?
The environment used for the network beta build was unique and is difficult to directly compare with the other venues. The pacing of bonfires will change based on the environments, and we are still in the midst of tuning and balancing the game progression. Items, too, were more of a beta decision. We will take the user behaviour and results to continue tuning the game to its top level. Life Gems are still being balanced and tuned, but I can tell you that the number of items will be limited to balance the game progression. How the items are to be used [is something] the player will have to decide, but in tight, intense moments, the Gems may help a little more, since players can walk away while recovery takes place.

In terms of size, how does *Dark Souls II*'s world compare to that of *Dark Souls*?
We are thinking about the same size world as *Dark Souls*. The storytelling will be fairly similar, but in regards to proceeding through the world, we want to give more freedom for the players to choose their decisions, and so the unfolding of the world will hopefully be unique to each player.

***Dark Souls* was P2P based; *Dark Souls II* uses servers. Why the change? Has the beta confirmed that this was the right decision?**
In connection with enhancing the roleplaying elements for *Dark Souls II*, we wanted players to take on their role in the universe. For this to be most effective, we felt that returning to a server-based game system will allow for more visibility on the loose connections with other players. The beta, we feel, did prove a lot of the game's functionality, and with the results we will continue to tune for our ideal game balance with online game play.

Did you find any of the classes were in need of rebalancing?
This is a very good point. The classes available in the network beta were only preset characters that we created internally and do not represent the balancing or characteristics in the final game. The balance of the classes is important, but the players will have the freedom to develop their own characters.

What of players who are daunted by *Dark Souls*' difficulty? What would you say to them?
A main theme in all games developed by FromSoftware is to not fully explain all the elements of how to play and challenge players to figure it out for themselves. We would like to encourage players to conquer the elements they face by paying attention to the surroundings and also being creative in strategising [about] how to overcome the difficulties. ■

The making of a modern indie game

Six leading creatives chew over the state of independent development



Rami Ismail

co-founder, Vlambeer

Steve Gaynor

co-founder, The Fullbright Company





Mike Bithell

creator of Thomas Was Alone

Katharine Neil

founder, Cheap Drunk Games





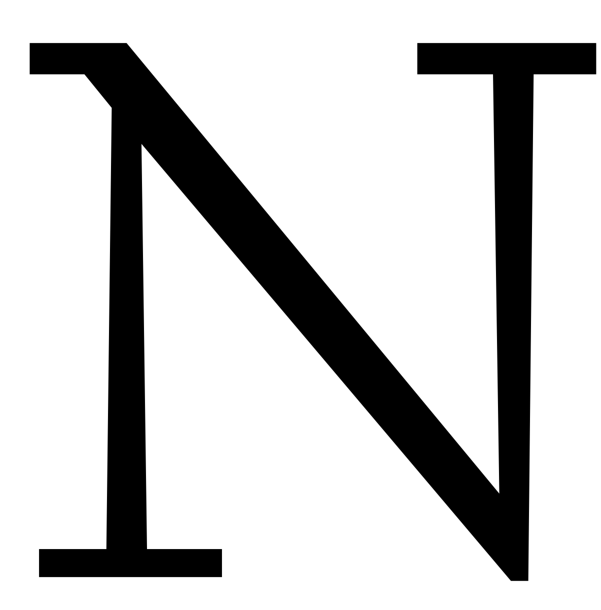
Tom Betts

lead coder, Big Robot

William Pugh

level designer, Galactic Cafe





ottingham's GameCity festival is the perfect place to have an informal discussion with independent developers. In presentations and demonstrations from creators, there's been an emphasis on expression, inclusiveness and diversity, complemented by a huge variety of games experimenting with form, style and input.

It's an exciting time for these developers, a time when those tinkering with the very fabric of gaming have spawned 'not games' and 'empathy games' as the industry grapples with a new vocabulary to deal with the space beyond the genres we know. Consumers are embracing such experiments in droves, while platform holders are opening their doors to creatives once restricted to working on PC and mobile. And crowdfunding continues to erode the grip of publishers, crowning the odd bedroom coder king from among the morass of nostalgia projects.

We've gathered developers from across the independent scene to talk about the state of modern indie games. Present for our discussion are **Rami Ismail**, founder, strategic director and developer at Vlambeer; **Mike Bithell**, creator of *Thomas Was Alone* and the forthcoming *Volume*; veteran designer and *Buddha Finger* writer **Katharine Neil**; *The Stanley Parable* level designer **William Pugh**; *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* lead coder **Tom Betts**; and **Steve Gaynor**, a co-founder of The Fullbright Company.

Self-publishing seems to have been a big theme for indies in 2013. Why has it been among the most dominant issues?

Rami Ismail Self-publishing was a big deal, but what's interesting is that it's not as much of a progression as people make it out to be. Self-publishing has been a part of indie gaming from the start. That's sort of where the term 'indie' originally comes from – something being self-published. Self-publishing was notable this year simply because the term was being thrown around a lot, because of the next-gen consoles.

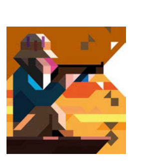
Steve Gaynor Well, in the last generation of consoles, indie developers had to have publishers. If I wanted to be on XBLA, somebody was going to have to front my game. The fact that they're going to change that situation on PS4 and maybe on Xbox One – at least theoretically – that's good; that's one fewer hoop for developers to jump through.

RI Exactly. If you were developing a game and you wanted to release it on 360 or PlayStation 3, you'd have to go through another company [that had] slots so you could release your game. That not only adds a middleman you have to deal with, it also just means that there's a lot more paperwork and you have less control. For a lot of indies, having the freedom to choose between self-publishing and not self-publishing is a big part of what they want, and it allows them to make more risky creative choices, because they don't have that middleman who has to agree with their choices. Now consoles are starting to open up to self-publishing, it just means that indies have additional platforms to launch on, which, I think we all agree, is a really wonderful [thing].

Mike Bithell The thing I think is cool is how it's changed the conversations with publishers. They need us a lot more than we need them at this point. They're coming to us as service providers.

RI We're shifting from a scarcity-based economy, where publishing slots on a console were scarce, to more of a convenience-based model, where every publisher or platform is a convenience. At this point, if Sony tells you, "Sorry, you can't launch your game on our platform," you can go to 700 other companies that would happily have your game.

MB Mmm. But I'm interested in whether or not we are speaking from a point of privilege – that we just have these relationships because we've got games that have done well.

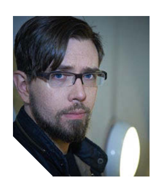


***Ridiculous Fishing* has made $900,000 but it almost killed Vlambeer when a clone beat the title to the App Store**

But can't platform holders of any kind hold you back? How does the iOS scene compare in terms of regulation?

Katharine Neil We've seen on iOS a little bit of censorship from Apple. Most of the time, we treat it like it's an open platform, but it's not really. And so what's going to happen with the console manufacturers being even more particular about their image – you know, Nintendo especially? Are platform owners going to start saying, "You're not meeting these [requirements]"?

RI So this is a big difference. [Vlambeer has] published on iOS and on consoles at this point. We've self-published on both, and we've gone through both of those processes, and at this point Apple is definitely the more open one. I think Apple is actually more



“People will Kickstart the shit out of a game just because it’s nice looking, not because it’s actually going to be a good game”

particular about their image – way more than the consoles are – because it’s a family platform more than the consoles are. These are devices that have to be usable for kids between the ages of three and 12.

KN I would be interested to see what would happen in a few years’ time if you tried to get something like Paolo Pedercini’s game [*Phone Story*, which was removed from the App Store] onto a Sony or Microsoft platform. They’ve not yet been exposed to that kind of work, because of the publishing model. Are they going to do what you say and be totally open? In terms of risk-taking, there’s so much more investment into making a game for a console platform, and now the question is classification.

Paolo Pedercini’s *Phone Story* dared to tackle the dark side of device manufacturing, which got it pulled from the App Store

MB I do think you’re right. I do think they’ve opened the floodgates, because they know we’re not going to make a game that is going to push that boundary quite so far. I still think sex and violence are going to be defined in much the same way that [they are in] film.

RI Indie is at this weird point where we’ve been growing a lot in the past few years. We’ve had a lot of attention in the media, from basic media to public television in the Netherlands. A mainstream, normal public television news [show] had an article on indie gaming and the influences of indie gaming on the Dutch economy. There’s definitely a point now where a lot of smaller games are reaching a larger audience, and we are at a breaking point in terms of what the systems that are in place can support.

MB We’re saying Sony and Microsoft aren’t like this, but I wonder how much of this is just a function of scale. If I want to go have lunch with Sony and talk to them within the next week, that’s something I can do, but that’s not going to be the case [when there’s] thousands of people working on those platforms.

Tom Betts But then you get to a situation where the gatekeeper gets more generous. You get more stuff coming through and then things start to be retroactively treated, so you get things getting taken off [a store], rather than not being let through.

RI The number of people making games at this point is way larger than it’s ever been. What’s interesting is that we’re definitely seeing a broader scope, like [Mattie Brice’s RPG] *Mainichi* or [Anna Anthropy’s flash game] *Dys4ia* – personal, intimate games that couldn’t exist ten years ago, or five years ago. Because discoverability is getting better, people are already finding the games they want, and the less visible games find it harder to find their audience.

Given the expense of working on consoles and the questionable discoverability of their stores, why would you not develop high-end games solely for PC?

SG I’ve only released something on PC. I feel like as far as survival and a base level of success goes, you don’t need any other platform than PC. And Steam is a gatekeeper, but even Steam is a much lower barrier than having to get a publisher and get your game onto additional hardware and so forth. All other platforms are like a really good bonus if you can swing it.

William Pugh In the first week [of selling *The Stanley Parable* on Steam], we sold 175,000 [units]. We were one of the first ones on Greenlight, so it was different than it is now, because back then there were only a few people on Greenlight, and everyone was looking at it. But now it’s been about a year, and now people just don’t go on it. You’ve got to really push for it [and] have a lot of media contacts. I know Robin [Arnott] is doing *SoundSelf*, and he’s having real trouble with Greenlight. [*SoundSelf*] is not the typical kind of ‘game’ game.



Galactic Cafe’s *The Stanley Parable* started life as a Source mod. Its expanded HD remake launched in October

RI Kickstarter, Greenlight: all these systems originally built to help indie developers have all backfired in this spectacular fashion.

SG People asked us why we didn’t do a Kickstarter or do any kind of that stuff, but things that fit for Greenlight or for Kickstarter are things where people are like, “I get it,” before it comes out. But there are other games where you have to finish it and have people play it, and that’s when they buy it.

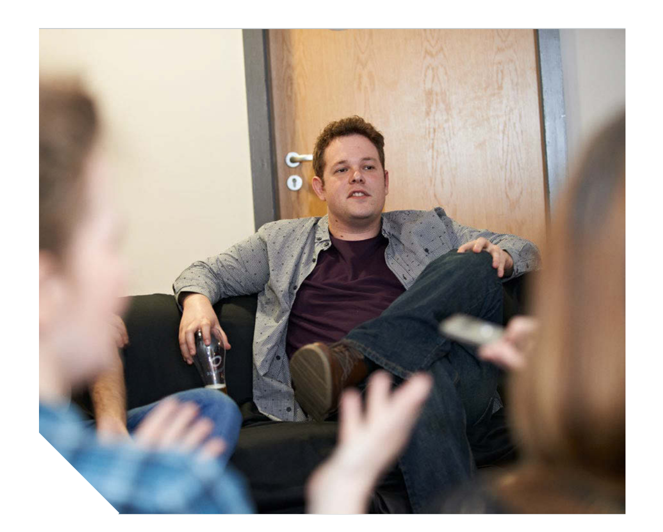
TB Me and Mike [Bithell] were at the talk when Valve launched

the whole process, and there was a lot of concern that games that were more arty were just not going to survive the process. The most popular thing isn't always the best thing.

KN It's sort of encouraging to hear this, actually – to hear from successful developers that they don't think their elevator pitch could have hundreds of thousands of prepackaged fans, because it's certainly how I feel. I don't feel that I could… I mean, I'm a developer; I'm not very good at branding myself. I think I could interest some people in my product before I sell it, but I think the proof is in the pudding, and I really respect that in execution. And maybe it's because I've had the idealism beaten out of me as a triple-A developer, but the craft and detail is in those things, and that's what you can't really put in a one-page purchase.

SG People will Kickstart the shit out of a game just because it's nice looking, not because it's actually going to be a good game. All these different approaches – a really nice pitch isn't necessarily going to be a great game, and a bad pitch could end up being a really beautiful game. All these things fall down.

The Double Fine Kickstarter was the one that really made everyone think, 'Oh, a videogame Kickstarter.' 'You've played a Tim Schafer game before – want another one?' That's a great pitch. My friends [Idle Thumbs] Kickstarted their podcast coming back, and they had three years of podcast archives. 'Do you like listening to this? Here's more.' But actual original stuff that doesn't have the advantage of really beautiful pixel art or something to latch on to is just harder to get off the ground.



TB We've used Kickstarter and Early Access [for *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*], so we've been using all of these things. They've worked really well for us, but I do think it depends on the sort of game. Our game is a procedural, incredibly iterative process.

***Sir, You Are Being Hunted* also has the support of PC gaming website Rock, Paper, Shotgun. The game's creative lead, Jim Rossignol, is a founding member of that site, after all, and it seems to have made a difference. How does press coverage impact all of you in terms of sales?**

RI Journalism is changing a lot. It used to be that you would get your game on a few large websites [and] you get your game in the open. One of the biggest things we see, and what Mike here is a hero at, is streaming and Let's Plays: live video of games with commentary.

MB If I get a two-minute mention in [YouTube commentator] TotalBiscuit's video sales roundups, that has a bigger effect purely on the money I make that day than having the front page of Kotaku or the front page of Polygon. From a purely financial perspective, regular YouTubers destroyed the gaming press ages ago. The difference is more like Sight & Sound magazine versus Film 2013 on the TV. Film 2013 gets more people to go to the cinema, but Sight & Sound has a role to play. The game press cater to people who have special interest and are fascinated by games; YouTubers talk to the gaming version of guys going to the cinema on Friday night. I think both of those audiences are massively important.

RI Even the *Ridiculous Fishing* mentions on Twitter – which was basically three days of my Twitter just constantly scrolling because there was so much being tweeted about that game – made us a lot of money. But if you look at a single mention from TotalBiscuit about [Vlambeer's RPG] *Serious Sam: The Random Encounter*, that spike was absurd.

MB I had a day job when I made *Thomas Was Alone*. When it came out and it was looking like it was going to do all right, I made a deal with myself that once this game hits a year's salary, I'm going to have the nerve to go and make another game. And I remember it weirdly hit that number on January 1. January 1, about 10am, TotalBiscuit put up a video and I had three years' salary by the end of that week.



***Thomas Was Alone* launched Bithell's solo career. He's now working on *Volume*, a stealth game made with streaming in mind**

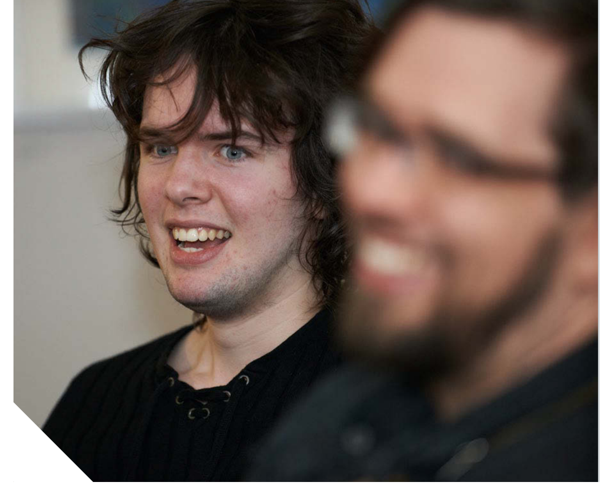
WP One thing we talked about when [YouTube commentator] PewDiePie put his thing up is that's a million people [reached], but a million people we would have never touched. There's no way we could have got them to even look at us without that guy.

RI Things like YouTubers and things like Kickstarter help us reach outside of the bubble now and then. The more people we can make aware of indie gaming as a whole, the better it is for everyone. This is what we established with the Indie Megabooth [at PAX]. We put it right in the middle of all the triple-A games to reach the audience that would not normally be that interested in indie games. It's one of the most interesting things about the community: we don't compete. It's the infinite sales theory. Chris Hecker once coined that. *Minecraft* still makes $100,000 a day from people who've never bought *Minecraft*, have never heard of *Minecraft*, and have heard of it just now. Even *Minecraft* hasn't hit saturation. But it's not competition.



"Most of your projects will fail. It won't necessarily be because you're crap. Possibly you are crap – but that's OK"

With the rise of free-to-play gaming and new revenue models, is the market defining the way you design your games at all?
RI We made a conscious decision to counter that. I do all the business decisions and the programming, and Jan Willem Nijman does all the design. He doesn't even know how much money is in our bank account. He is unaware of anything related to business.
MB My design is totally influenced by business. I don't do free to play, because free to play is the devil's business. But one of the key factors with *Volume* is designing with Let's Players and streamers in mind. I want to make a game that looks good to watch, as well as to play. That's a business concern, because that will affect sales.
TB Because we've been doing [*Sir, You Are Being Hunted*] through Kickstarter and through Early Access, many of our decisions have been based on player feedback. That's been an interesting design process for us. But because our game's procedural and there's only three of us, it can create ten billion scenarios and we can't check all those little errors in it, or the little emergent stuff. But [the early players] will see stuff that I'll know is theoretically possible, but I'll never see it. Someone will post a screenshot and I'll think, 'Oh shit, someone can do that.' It's really refreshing and it's let us go further with the procedural stuff than we could have done.



What piece of advice would you give to others who have ambitions of becoming successful indie developers today?
SG Make things and finish those things and put them out. And then make another thing. The biggest [mistake] that people make is say, "I'm going to make my masterpiece now." No. Pick something small that you can actually do, get it out there, get people playing it and telling you what they think of it. And do it again until you get to the point where you're actually making it. It might be the first thing that you make that is really successful, but people get hung up on, "I'm not going to release this until it's actually perfect." Just put it out and get people to tell you what's wrong with it, and then make it again.
TB Your ideas always work in your head; you have to make them to realise they don't work.
RI I can ask all of you for a game idea and everyone can have a game idea in the next five seconds. But that isn't worth anything. It's only worth something if we start implementing, if we start trying and testing and iterating.
KN Statistically, most of your projects will fail. Either aesthetically, [or] probably commercially. Even Rovio: they released ten games before *Angry Birds*. You will fail, you will fail often. It won't necessarily be because you're crap. Possibly you are crap – but that's OK. It's a craft. It's like anything else. You can't become a genius filmmaker overnight, can you? Spend your entire life doing it. ■



Sir, You Are Being Hunted **is in alpha now, and the Industrial biome for its procedural landscape creator arrived in October**



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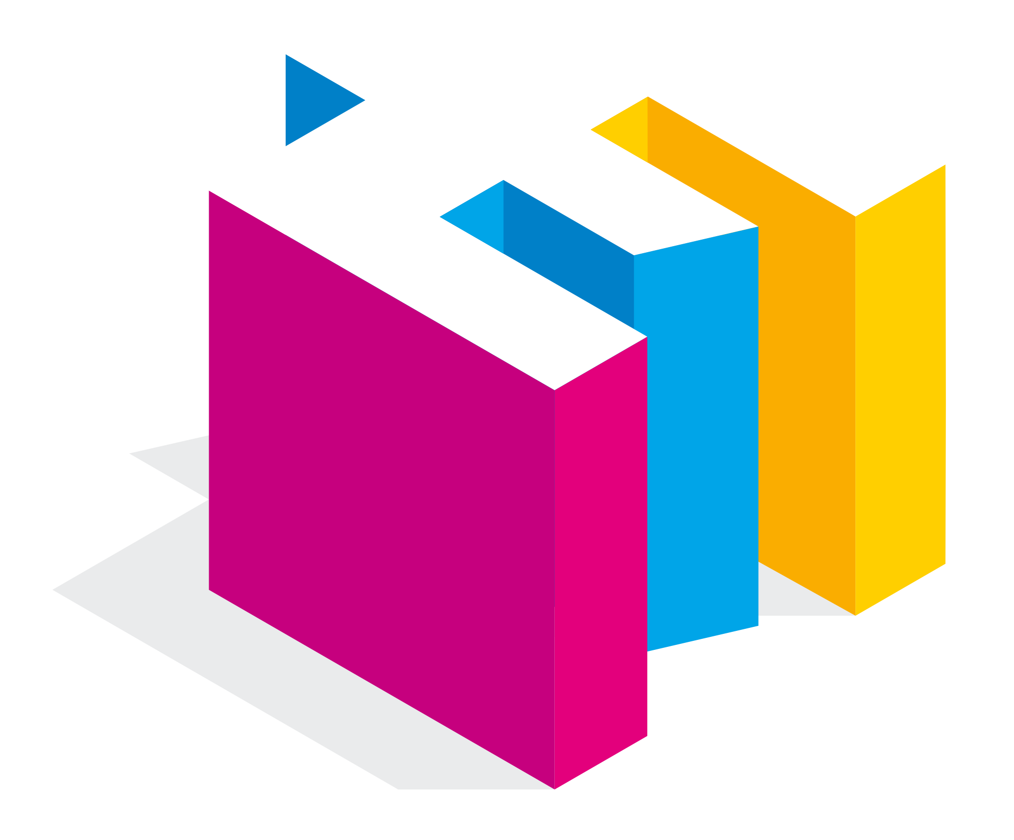


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WORLDWIDE DELIVERY!





THE EDGE AWARDS 2013

For all the hype surrounding a new generation of consoles, 2013 demonstrated that mastery over the form is more significant than the number of particles pushed onto screens. The vast world of Los Santos layered glistening beauty upon gruelling grit, while *The Last Of Us* cut through an overcrowded genre with a refined script and unflinching creative vision. Both are standouts of a year in which big-budget games pushed at the limits of size and polish, but were otherwise content to refine genres rather than reinvent them. Again, the indie scene picked up the slack, daring to tell stories of emotional hardship and the nature of choice. But even it seemed focused on the promise of consoles to come, with a number of games slipping to 2014.

Oddly, it's a maturing wave of hardware – 3DS, Vita and Wii U – that delivered the biggest surprises of 2013. The two portables have seen a turnaround in their fortunes, thanks to developers who understand their audiences and are taking risks with new ways to play. These span from the iterative, such as *Fire Emblem Awakening*, to the wildly inventive, such as *Tearaway*. Wii U, meanwhile, continues to sell dismally, but has produced a standout gem that might save it in *Super Mario 3D World*. And that's the key: as the E3 fallout made abundantly clear, the videogame industry is only as good as its games.

BEST GAME





Grand Theft Auto V

Format PS3, 360 **Publisher** Rockstar **Developer** In-house (Rockstar North)

Once upon a time, while playing *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, we would lean back and wonder what such a game might look and feel like in the future, its rough edges smoothed out, its ambition explored in more detail. In September this year we found out – and the reality exceeded our daydreams. Given that it's made up of so many moving parts, *Grand Theft Auto V* should collapse in on itself the moment you begin messing with it, but instead its countless pieces work in concert like a mesmirising symphony. For its self-belief, its scale, its art, its soundtrack, its three-way character twist, its lightning-cracked skies, its churning waves, its mountain-top parachute leaps and its desperate, bodywork-mangling storm-drain escapes, it is our game of the year.



The Last Of Us

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog

There was never any doubt that Naughty Dog would spin a ripping yarn, but the sheer scale of its achievement caught us on the hop. The game's sombre riff on *Uncharted*'s magic makes for a journey that is at once more human and more affecting than past videogame adventures, one that leaves you wishing all others could match this remarkable standard.

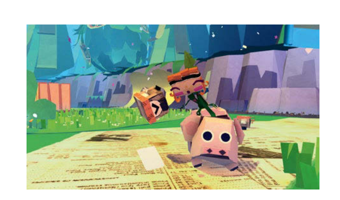




Tearaway

Format Vita **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Media Molecule

Tearaway's heartrending conclusion will live long in the memory, but so will the adventure that precedes it. We upholstered an elk, pinned a moustache on a pig, and drew malformed flames and wonky snowflakes. We mugged endlessly for the camera. Media Molecule's latest gem flings one thing after another at you, each more playful and more joyful than the last.

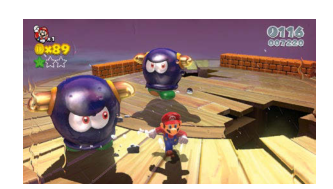




Super Mario 3D World

Format Wii U **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house

Back in the shade you go, Luigi. Just as with 3DS, and so many Nintendo systems of yore, it's Mario that's made Wii U an irresistible proposition. *3D World* is the archetypal *Mario* game – a relentless succession of ideas formed, finessed and thrown away to make room for the next one – and if there's any justice also a shot in the arm for Nintendo's confused platform.





Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** In-house (Montreal)

This pirate sim barely needs the *Assassin's Creed* name, but heading to open ocean liberates a series once tangled in its historical trappings. *Black Flag* revels in the freedom, its vagabond wanderings across turquoise waters spiced with bountiful distractions and ship-to-ship combat beyond compare.

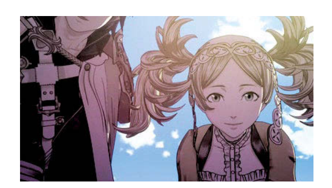


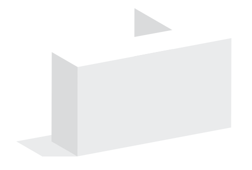


Fire Emblem Awakening

Format 3DS **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems

Permadeath is callous. *Awakening* humanises it, its network of player-forged relational bonds meaning defeat snatches away not generic soldiers but beloved allies. Keeping everyone alive is a challenge, yet a Casual mode means this is also the most approachable *Fire Emblem* yet. It's a rare strategy game that warms not just your grey matter but also your heart.

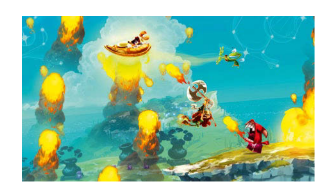




Rayman Legends

Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** In-house (Montpellier)

Legends has an unstoppable rhythm, a bevy of ideas and a world of content. It's forever urging you on and always showing you something new, serving up multiplayer combative football, rhythm-action platforming, and daily challenges. *Legends* takes its handful of verbs – jump, run and punch – and gets as much mileage from them as Nintendo on its best days.



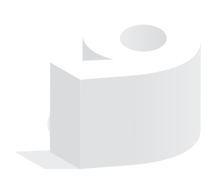


The Stanley Parable

Format PC **Publisher/developer** Galactic Cafe

This intelligent firstperson exploration game guides you through variously funny, sad, exciting and unnerving meditations on the nature of games. It strikes a masterful balance of tone and achieves a tremendous sense of personality by treating the player as a player and not as a problem to be solved. It features some of the year's smartest writing, too.





Dota 2

Format PC **Publisher** Valve **Developer** In-house

The year's standout success in eSports, *Dota 2* has a tremendous ability to draw out the personality of its players. Valve has steadily improved the game's accessibility while pioneering new ways for fans to contribute to it, express themselves, and even earn money from their contributions. It's the biggest game on Steam right now for a very good reason.





Papers, Please

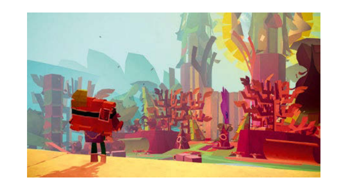
Format PC **Publisher/developer** Lucas Pope

Papers, Please takes the vocabulary of the adventure game – checking and comparing information, retaining details, and critical analysis – and applies it to a study of the tyranny of bureaucracy. Understated but powerful, it demonstrates the power games have as persuasive tools and it does so by teaching, not lecturing, you.



BEST VISUAL DESIGN





Tearaway

Format Vita **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Media Molecule

Rather than simply make a world out of virtual parchment, Media Molecule decided *Tearaway*'s objects would each be crafted from a single sheet of paper. It led to the studio forming a papercraft team, bringing new meaning to 'pen-and-paper prototyping', and the effect is remarkable. Despite being made from a virtual approximation of dead matter, every strip of land, unfurling platform and parchment porker in *Tearaway* feels oddly real. Next-gen be damned: particles are no match for a skilled artist's scissors.



Ryse: Son Of Rome

Format Xbox One **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Crytek

CryEngine 3's ability to replicate reality with uncanny fidelity was proven years ago, but it's in *Ryse* where the tech is put to its most creative use, conjuring up fantasy recreations of Britain and Rome as naturalistic as they are artistic. Indeed, it's Crytek's art as much as the tech behind it that makes *Ryse* such an achievement.



BioShock Infinite

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** In-house (Irrational)

Fantasy worlds aren't uncommon in games, but it takes a creative leap to suspend 1890s cobbled streets in the air and then fill them with belligerent nationalists who have made literal art from prejudice. There are few game worlds to match the spectacle of Columbia's Americana, and few fantasies so fully realised.

BEST AUDIO DESIGN





The Last Of Us

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog

Birdsong and the swish of waves fill our world until the wind instruments swell and a grimy window frame appears. *TLOU*'s title screen says much of the restraint of its soundtrack, and its audio designers are just as fond of grace notes. A rifle's crack is more arresting in the stillness, while the crash of a bottle between guttural Clicker pops makes sweaty-palmed stealth an alternative to gunplay. Only in so quiet a world could Joel's hearing ability work, your senses stretched taut by the vulnerability inherent in having to stop to listen.



Grand Theft Auto V

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Developer** In-house (North)

Given Rockstar's track record, it was a given that *GTAV* would be soundtracked by an impossibly cool, genre-spanning set of radio stations, but the studio outdid itself here. A series-first original score meant Rockstar's muso flair no longer faded away with the click of the driver's door, and *GTAV*'s world was the richer for it.



Battlefield 4

Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Publisher** EA **Developer** In-house (DICE)

DICE's audio tech has found its way into many games courtesy of its Frostbite engine – and even into the likes of *Mass Effect 3* as EA's studios turn to the Swedish team for advice – but it's in *Battlefield* where its audio mastery is best deployed. Its multiplayer battlefields feel like real war zones where every sound is a tell if you listen hard enough.

PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR

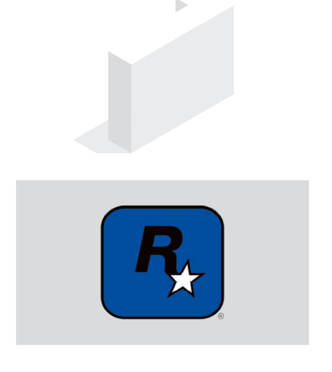


Nintendo

With no new hardware to launch, Nintendo spent 2013 focusing on games, and it's been uncommonly prolific. 3DS got the best *Animal Crossing*, the best *Fire Emblem* and, in *X&Y*, perhaps the best *Pokémon* yet. On Wii U, we had a loving *Pikmin* update and the vibrant, majestic *Super Mario 3D World*. Also encouraging was a willingness to partner with external studios. *The Wonderful 101* might not have hit the mark, but it represents a welcome shift away from total dependency on peerless internal studios.



STUDIO OF THE YEAR



Rockstar North

Few studios enjoy the luxury of five years between sequels, and fewer still would be allowed a late delay that pushes a release into a new financial year. But Rockstar North is given free rein because the end product will be worth it. Like *GTA*s past, *GTAV* melded best-in-class world, visual and audio design, though this time it had the mechanics to match. It's the sort of game only possible when a publisher gives enough time and budget to one of the most talented, committed studios in the world.



Sony Computer Entertainment

The Last Of Us and *Tearaway* set new standards on PS3 and Vita, while releases such as *Beyond: Two Souls*, *Puppeteer* and *Rain* demonstrate Sony's commendable willingness to take risks even if they might not always pay off. And no other publisher has shown such a convincing commitment to indie developers, or given them so much prominence in 2013.

Ubisoft

Ubisoft was a force across all platforms in 2013, taking risks on curiosities such as *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*, cultivating an expensive niche with *Rayman Legends*, and developing the best of the PS4/XO launch titles with *ACIV*, while also investing in mobile. *The Division*, *The Crew* and *Watch Dogs* suggest the creativity will continue into 2014.



Naughty Dog

The Last Of Us was seen as a stopgap, made by Naughty Dog's B team to flesh out PS3's lineup while the *Uncharted* team did big things for PS4. *TLOU*, however, was better than any Nathan Drake outing, proving Naughty Dog has no B team and cementing its position not only as the best of Sony's Worldwide Studios, but as an industry leader.



Simogo

From the wintry chills of *Year Walk* to the stylish mysteries of *Device 6*, 2013 has seen this two-man team broaden its range – with the help of some talented collaborators – to become the most exciting creative force on iOS. Dark, enigmatic and playful, these two short stories marry riveting narratives with unorthodox systems and flawless presentation.

THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS 2013

WELSHEST SIDEKICK

Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch

Format PS3 **Publisher** Namco Bandai
Developer Level-5

Awards, is it? While *Ni No Kuni* protagonist Oliver was a damp squib, his fairy foil, Mr Drippy, was nothing short of comedic gold. Not content with carrying the cutscenes through sheer charisma and poking gentle fun at genre conventions, he had the **Edge** office affecting accents thick enough to make a male voice choir weep. Proper tidy, they were.



MOST FUMBLED SPLEENS

Surgeon Simulator 2013

Format PC
Publisher/developer Bossa Studios

As the Casualty music trills on, we stare at a chest cavity full of scalpels. Then we look to our rubbery sinistrous hand, in which an organ wobbles. We need to put it down, but it bounces away across the desk like a gasping fish. It's testament to Bossa's blackly comic handling that we chuckle and reach for the claw hammer, not a chunder bucket.



THE 2013 MOLYNEUX AWARD FOR EMPTIEST PROMISES

SimCity

Format PC **Publisher** EA
Developer Maxis

Oh, EA. We'd just about learned to live with bungled online launches till this. Far from the utopian vision sold, what we got was a mess of bugs, idiot Sims and microtransactions. But what burned most was when hackers showed claims about the 'significant' power of the cloud masked only an easily removed DRM system. Nobody can simulate trust – not even you.

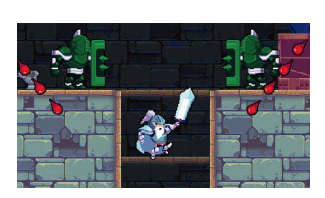


LEAST WELCOME INHERITANCE

Rogue Legacy

Format PC
Publisher/developer Cellar Door Games

Passing cash and unlocks down the generations sweetens the bitter roguelike pill, but *Rogue Legacy*'s genius lies in giving each new heir a genetic quirk. Some help, but many more hinder. Alzheimer's removes the map; nearsightedness takes depth-of-field to the extreme; dyslexia garbles text. Worst is vertigo, which has you running along ceilings till you meet your maker even earlier than usual.

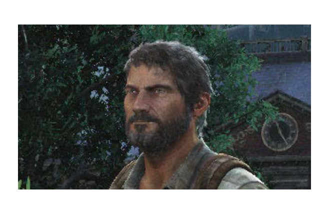


BEST BEARD

The Last Of Us

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer Naughty Dog

Videogame beards are terrible. Even games with deep levels of character customisation fall short, their endless selection of soul patches and daft moustaches a clear attempt to distract from the flat textures of their dreadful full beards. We thought all was lost, but then there was Joel, his facial forestry varying in length and colour, with bristles that could scrub mould from the grout on a bathroom wall.



SHODDIEST HARDWARE

Payday 2

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** 505 Games
Developer Overkill Software, Starbreeze Studios

They'd like you to believe *Payday 2* is a heist sim – a game of casing joints, subduing guards, and making off with a truckload of booty before the police turn up. Yet in reality, *Payday 2* is a game of resetting one overheating drill after another because some criminal mastermind has, despite the tens of millions in your safe house, sourced your crew's hardware on the cheap.



SNAPPIEST PICK-UP LINE

Saints Row IV

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Deep Silver
Developer Volition, Inc

Volition's stripped-down take on *Mass Effect*'s slow-burning flirtation was its smartest trick. After three games, cookie-cutter gangsta Pierce gets some depth, saying he doesn't usually swing that way (before saying yes), regardless of your gender. It's tech wizard Kinzie, however, who steals the show. Proposition her and she growls, "Let's go," punches you in the face, and jumps on top of you.



THE POWER OF THE CLOUD AWARD

Killer Instinct

Format Xbox One **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Double Helix Games

We get it. You can't sell 60fps in screenshots, and thanks to bullshots, 1080p means nothing. The answer is particle effects. Almost every new-gen launch game comes with its own big cloud of something small, but *Killer Instinct* takes the crown. When two fireballs meet and cancel each other out, the resulting shower of sparks briefly obscures the screen, health bars and all. Jago wins.



BEST 3DO GAME

LocoCycle

Format Xbox One **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Twisted Pixel Games

Streaming FMV backgrounds; badly acted, overlong live-action cutscenes; the bare minimum of anything resembling gameplay – *LocoCycle* celebrates the advent of a new hardware generation like it's 1994, setting storytelling, gender relations and, well, graphics back a couple of decades. Quite how a design that's 20 years too late can take up 13GB of Xbox One hard drive space is one of the year's biggest mysteries.

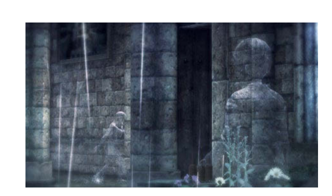


WORST ICO IMPRESSION

Rain

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer In-house (Japan)

Even the most ardent indie apologist must sometimes balk at the excess of sentimentality congealed around the development scene's well-meaning heart. *Rain*, like so many pretenders, wants to move you like *Ico* did, but feels like a bad cover version of a song you love. All the ingredients are there – a sombre location, a boy and a girl, wispy monsters – but the finished article is far from Iconic.

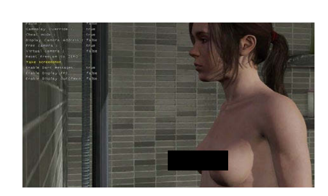


CREEPIEST CHARACTER MODELLING

Beyond: Two Souls

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer Quantic Dream

David Cage wants to change the way we play, and also, it would seem, the way we picture celebrities naked. *Beyond*'s debug camera controversy reveals that someone had the job of flicking through pictures of Ellen Page and working out what her breasts are like – time perhaps better spent ensuring that debug controls weren't in the review code at all.

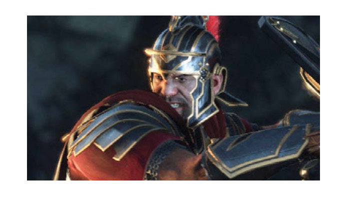


PEARLIEST WHITES

Ryse: Son Of Rome

Format Xbox One **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Crytek

Ryse's characters, with their racks of pristine teeth, are a moist, glistening assault on the uncanny valley. And a historically accurate one, too, given Imperial Rome pioneered the use of crowns and dentures. If *Ryse* leads the way, this generational shift will be marked by resolution upgrades, framerate boosts, and an end to NPCs with gaping black voids in the middle of their faces.



Q&A: AARON GARBUT

Art director, Rockstar North

How did our game of the year winner, *Grand Theft Auto V*, make it from the drawing board to become the biggest-selling title of 2013? Rockstar North art director **Aaron Garbut** explains what it was like to be part of the five-year process of its creation, the challenges of designing a world for multiple lead characters, and the power of incredible lighting in setting an unforgettable mood.

How did having three playable characters inform your design choices when it came to building the world?
The world is always designed before the game. That's just the way we do things. We have a chunk of preproduction where a subset of the art team lay out and build a white box city. We get the roads feeling good, the vistas working well and look at the skyline and landmarks. We spend a long time driving and building and tweaking and getting everything in place and feeling balanced, making sure the districts we have chosen will blend together naturally and as a whole create the feeling of the city. As missions and story come together, I work with the level designers to place missions and key locations and to utilise as much of the world as we can.



We did know the [biographies] for the three characters right at the start, so we knew we wanted to create an area for Trevor out in the sticks. Towards the beginning of preproduction, I met up with [Rockstar president] Sam [Houser] in LA, and we spent a week together driving about, just exploring and talking. During that trip, we drove out into the desert and eventually ended up visiting Salton Sea [in California]. We went to an amazing spot called Bombay Beach and expected a real-life Trevor to burst out on us at any second. When the full reference trip was organised, we sent a team out to Salton Sea for a few days.

With *GTA Online* planned as such a large part of the experience, and one which we knew we wanted to sustain, we really didn't have the luxury of focusing solely on the singleplayer journey. We had to ensure that the world as a whole was coherent and of consistent quality. We also knew we wanted to give the entire world a sense of life, and to encourage and reward the player for exploring. I think if this was a linear experience, the three characters would have had a bigger impact on the design and workload of the world.

As it was, though, they just gave us a few anchor points. All the things that hung off of that – the contrasts, the fidelity and detail, the personality – we would have done anyway. At a certain point, the detail and scope is just so big that you can do what you want within it and it has little impact on production.

What were the most valuable lessons you'd learnt through previous *GTA*s that were transferable to this project?
Mostly not to get locked down to anything, whether it's a process, a plan, a goal, an asset, an idea – anything. To keep completely open-minded, adapt to the situation and always look for a better way forward, rather than stick with what's been decided previously. I don't mean chop and change for the sake of it, but let what's best for the game dictate the way forward. With a game that's as large and complex as this, the ideas need to be fluid, and you need to be paying as much attention as you can to every aspect to make sure they're working together.

We've got an amazing art team here that is extremely experienced at building open worlds. We've been doing it for 15 years, so a lot of the problems and solutions are just so ingrained in us that we don't really notice them. There's always new things that come along, though, and the nature of how we approach development means that we need to be ready to adapt. The world is built first, then missions, then structure and story, and all the time all our systems are developing and changing. Each of these things influences the others massively, so each needs to adapt to the others. We are always playing and refining, adjusting each element of the game to play better with the others. We're rarely throwing away content; it's more about adapting plans and constantly looking ahead with a clean slate, rather than sticking stubbornly to old decisions.

I always think of the process the same way I was taught in art college to draw or sculpt. It's about sketching in the overall vision and then layering and working in additional detail, pulling the end result out of the page. It's just that we have a thousand people all drawing at once on the same page. We're lucky – a lot of us have been doing this together for so long that we know how to work together.

Looking back, how do you think the final version of the game matches up to your initial vision?
It's hard to remember the original vision now. We always have a very basic idea of what we want to achieve, but from day one it's evolving and adapting. As a game, the initial vision is

"IT'S AN AMAZING THING – TO BUILD WHAT FEELS LIKE A REAL PLACE AND THEN FOR NEARLY 30 MILLION PEOPLE TO LIVE THERE"

always very rough. We decided right at the start we wanted to do three switchable characters, we decided who the main characters were and we decided the general tone for the game. Then we just built and evolved and let the game dictate itself.

[Having] multiple characters was a leap of faith. It was an interesting idea, and it felt like we could do interesting things with it, but it also felt like a change to the core of the game that might backfire. I think it really worked out. It's so hard during development to get perspective – you get so used to looking for the problems that it becomes almost impossible to step back and see the positives. On this project, despite living in that world for years, playing the missions again and again, it felt fun. It felt great to experience the world, to see it evolve from the basic building blocks to the finished detailed results with all the scenarios and life added. I still think of it like a real place in a lot of ways. That's an amazing thing – to build what feels like a real place and then for nearly 30 million people to live there.

As a group of people, we're never short of ideas. There are always things that come up during development that you want to add. Often we do, but the closer you get to release, the less that happens. I don't feel like the game fell short, but there is undoubtedly a huge volume of plans and ideas that we wanted to do to push it further.

What I love about our *GTA Online* plans is that the game is no longer static. We can continue to add these things and evolve. That's even more exciting these days, where through forums, Reddit, etc, we have a real direct connection to the people playing the game. We can respond to what they are into and what they hate more than ever. It's something that really suits the way we work, the way we're always trying to adapt the experience and avoid walking blindly down a set path.

Los Santos is the series' closest analogy to a real location – how does that affect how it's designed?

We always use the same process: working with real cities, starting on a macro level to define the districts we want to use, and working down. I think the only variation is how many real landmarks we decide to use once we get to the individual building level. I always feel we build our own world – we're still a long way from being dictated by reality. Instead, we use it as a starting point. We'll move entire districts about geographically, never mind individual buildings.

I'd never want to rebuild a city. I think that would be a lot less satisfying both for us to build and for the player to play. In a lot of ways, it would be less convincing, too. At least that's how I rationalise it to myself. Only a relatively small subset of players ever get to know the real LA or New York. Most experience it through film and TV, or through short visits, and that's a highly edited representation. We do the same: we take the feel of a city, the one we get through visiting and through experiencing it our whole lives through media, and build that. We compress, we edit, we emphasise certain things and we end up with something that in some ways, I think, feels more like the popular perception of the place than the actual city. Only because the popular perception isn't the real city, if that makes sense.

The game's lighting system works really hard to evoke moods – how important do you think it is to the finished game?

It's absolutely vital. Good lighting makes all the difference; it's what binds the experience together. We have an extremely good lighting team who have worked together to push and push what was previously possible. It's a hell of a lot of work and tuning, held together by extremely optimal and clever code with a layer of hacky tricks over the top to give us the things that shouldn't be possible.

Sam Houser once told us that recreating neon lighting in *Vice City* was an important breakthrough during its development. Were there equivalent points while making *GTAIV* and *V*?

On *IV*, that was when the lighting – and in particular the realtime shadows – came online. That was a revelation for us at the time, having spent years on PS2 baking in static lighting. Suddenly, everything felt solid. On *V*, it was similar: the lighting system was reworked and we had a system that could draw much nicer shadows over much farther distances. The first time I saw the shadows drawing all the way into the distance while flying over the city was one of those moments – and then when the lighting [level of detail] system came together, we suddenly had a world that seemed so much more alive at night.

From your position as art director, which part of creating the game was the most enjoyable?

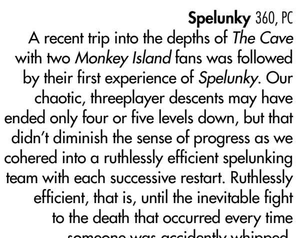
I love working with level design. As we're laying out the world and blocking it in, we're considering gameplay and coming up with mission ideas. I always do my best to push those ideas through, but I think the most enjoyable part of the project is when we start to place everything in the world. Once the locations are in place and level designers start to get everything to flow together and the cutscenes plugging in, it ticks over from being a series of disconnected elements into a game. It's at this point – once everything is in place, to some degree – that the work actually starts. It's that last chunk when you make the hard decisions, where elements that are not working have to be changed and where you can iterate. It's hard. It takes a long time. But it's the bit that makes all the difference. I'm not entirely sure if it's the most enjoyable, but it's certainly the most rewarding. ■

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Puzzle & Dragons iOS
GungHo's blend of *Bejeweled*'s match-three core, *Pokémon*'s completionist fervour, and social gaming trickery is a potent one, but we're starting to wonder how much of a role we're playing. With our leader healing our party with every matched row of orbs, and another beast boasting over 3,000 HP, we're as good as invincible, and spend most of our time managing inventory and invites. We still can't put it down, of course.



Spelunky 360, PC
A recent trip into the depths of *The Cave* with two *Monkey Island* fans was followed by their first experience of *Spelunky*. Our chaotic, threeplayer descents may have ended only four or five levels down, but that didn't diminish the sense of progress as we cohered into a ruthlessly efficient spelunking team with each successive restart. Ruthlessly efficient, that is, until the inevitable fight to the death that occurred every time someone was accidently whipped.

Mount Your Friends 360
Stegersaurus Games' unassuming, and phallus-obsessed, XBLIG title might just be the greatest party game ever created. The sheer tension of watching an opponent approaching your high-water mark as the clock ticks down is equalled only by the sense of triumph you feel each time you reach the summit of an ever-growing man-mountain. Plenty of games cast you as a hero, but few truly make you feel like one.



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REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Reality is rubbish

Forza Motorsport 5 (p90) is barely a minute old before it makes you sit through an unskippable cutscene voiced by Jeremy Clarkson. Later you'll have to put up with his comrades, James May and Richard Hammond, too. A Top Gear tie-in is perhaps a logical move for a racing game on the most TV-focused videogame system we've seen yet, but the end product tells us much about what works, and what doesn't, at a next-gen launch. When you're trying to showcase a new console's power, reality loses to fantasy every time.

Take *Forza 5's* Dunsfold Aerodrome track, the setting for Top Gear's Star In A Reasonably Priced Car segment. There is precisely nothing sexy or system-selling about a disused WWII airfield in Surrey, and developer Turn 10 knows it. The roadside cardboard cutouts of London landmarks are a clear – and botched – attempt to build something interesting out of nothing. It may run at 60fps in 1080p, but in this moment *Forza* looks, oddly for something based on reality, all too lifeless.



Instead, the most visually striking launch games eschew reality. In *Ryse: Son Of Rome* (p86), Imperial Rome gives Crytek licence to fling fire, smoke and legions of soldiers about the place. On PS4, it's *Killzone: Shadow Fall* (p82), its hyper-real art style and far-future setting providing the perfect backdrop for a dazzling next-gen show. The lifeless trackside furniture of a field in Surrey simply can't compete.

It's not a hard and fast rule, of course, as PS4's *Knack* (p101) and Xbox One's *Crimson Dragon* (p102) show clearly. And let's not even get started on *LocoCycle* (p103). But the days when racing games were the best showcase of new console hardware seem to be over. As far as the eighth generation is concerned, reality bites – especially if it's Jeremy Clarkson on the mic.

Killzone: Shadow Fall

Publisher SCE
Developer Guerrilla Games
Format PS4
Release Out now

You have to wonder why the Helghast bother; they're too dumb to win a war. Partway through *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, we creep up behind a lone grunt on a clifftop that's high above an enemy base. At first we think he's talking to himself, but soon realise he's sending a message to his brother; he's recording one of the audio logs sprinkled about *Shadow Fall*'s campaign, which play through the DualShock 4 speaker. It's a smart moment, but what follows is anything but. We pick up a nearby sniper rifle, take out one of the Helghast below and two of his colleagues notice and dive behind the same piece of cover. We headshot the first; the other dives down out of sight. Then, seconds later, he emerges in the exact spot where his comrade fell, his cranium lined up perfectly in our crosshairs.

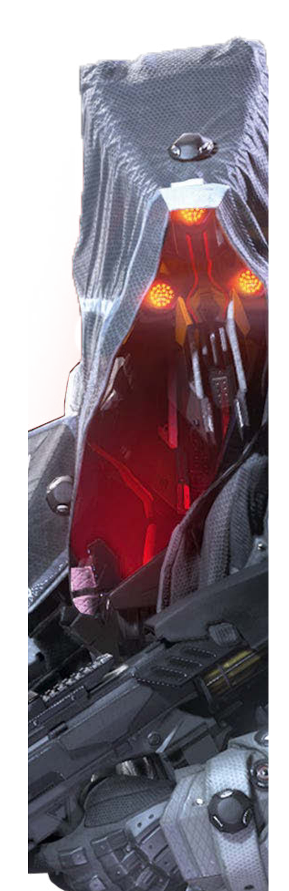
Shadow Fall takes several steps forward for *Killzone*, but sadly not enough of PS4's extra processing power has been focused on improved AI. Your Helghast foes get a bead on you, shoot once and then stop. They jog from cover to cover by rote, seemingly oblivious to your presence and assault rifle. Good shooter AI is predictable, readable and surmountable: you see a *Halo* Grunt or Elite and know exactly how it will behave, because you've learned its patterns and beaten them a hundred times over. Admittedly, the Helghast come in several flavours – infantry, cloaked snipers, shotgun-wielding heavies – but all are united by their stupidity. This is an alien force that builds riot shields to cover up every part of their carrier's body apart from the glowing weak point. The game built as PlayStation's answer to *Halo* still can't beat its old rival for enemy intelligence.

It takes a little longer than usual for that to become clear, however, because it's 25 minutes before Guerrilla puts a firearm in your hands. It's a curious but brave decision that does a fine job of setting the story, casting you as Lucas Kellan, who sees his father gunned down by Helghan troops during a tense escape from their invasion of the city of Vekta. He's taken under the wing of Thomas Sinclair, a Vektan Shadow Marshal who, 14 years later, has risen up the ranks to director; Kellan has, of course, become a Shadow Marshal too.

In fact, though, this slow-paced opening has little to do with drama and everything to do with tech. The real message Guerrilla wants to deliver isn't heavy-handed moralising about far-future fascism, though there's plenty of that; all it wants you to take from this gunless half an hour is that this is what videogames look like now. Searchlight beams burst through windows to show off Guerrilla's lighting. Torn flags flutter on the breeze to showcase *Shadow Fall*'s cloth physics. Half a mile away, a burnt-out floor of a tower gives a glimpse of fire and smoke. Kellan himself casts a reactive shadow to make Peter Pan proud. From high in the sky, we look down on the thousand glass skyscrapers that compose the universe's most reflective city. And when an office chair is knocked on its side in the commotion, its wheels carry on spinning. When the title card appears, it reads *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, but it might as well say Welcome To The New Generation.

When you do finally lay your hands on a rifle, it's got no ammo. That will come, but not until after Guerrilla's introduced the OWL, a controllable drone that adds a certain flexibility to the genre-standard running and gunning. Four modes are selected via directional swipes on the DualShock 4 touchpad, with a fifth – hacking terminals or disabling alarm towers – triggered whenever an appropriate object's in range. The OWL attacks groups of enemies, deploys a force field in front of you or emits a shockwave that stuns foes and destroys their shields. It can revive you, too, using adrenaline packs found in the world, which can also be used to give you a brief power boost, slowing time when you aim down your sights. The OWL's most important contribution, however, is a zip-line, helping you speedily navigate levels that are, on the whole, a good deal more open than those of *Killzone*s past.

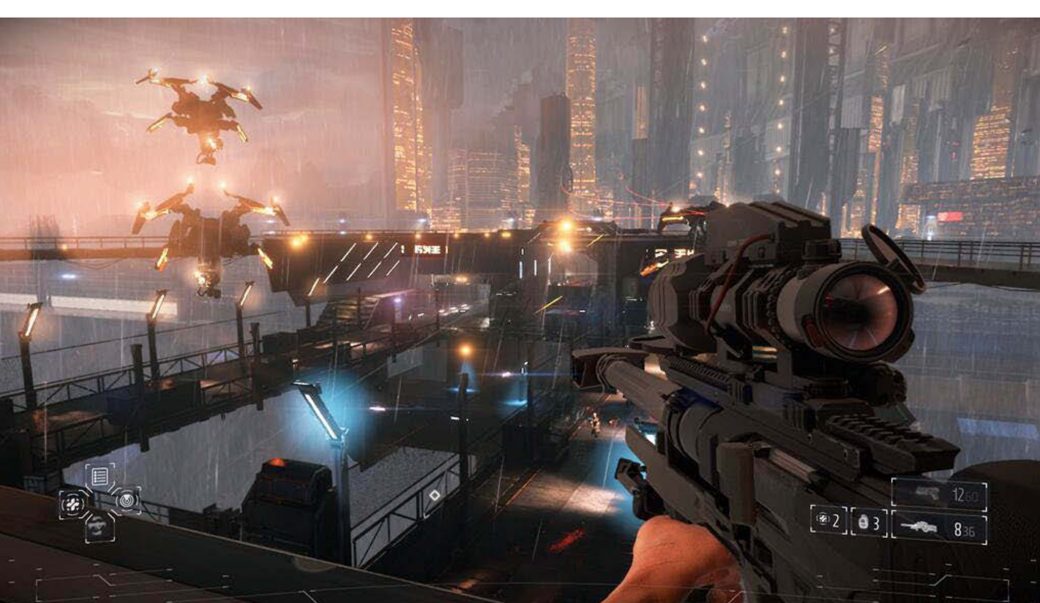
The AI matters less when sneaking up on snipers in their towers, or zip-lining down to surprise a group of grunts



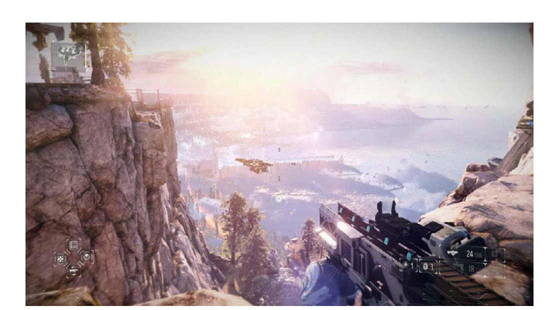
None more so than the green land in which you find yourself when your arsenal is complete. It's a huge, open expanse with a comms tower to conquer at one end and a clifftop anti-air emplacement in need of dollops of C4 at the other. In between lies a forest with snipers on overwatch on raised platforms, infantry on the ground and a network of tunnels beneath. Here, you'll quickly come to realise the importance of the Tactical Echo, a sonar burst that highlights enemies and pickups within a certain range. Using it is a clever balance of risk and reward: hold the button down for too long trying to extend its range and it'll overload, emitting a noise that alerts nearby enemies. It slots neatly into this fertile belt, which feels more like a world than a level, and proves a great way of introducing you to your expanded moveset. Enemy AI matters less when you're sneaking up on snipers in their towers, zip-lining down to surprise a group of grunts on the ground and stabbing the last of them in the back before he can trigger the alarm. We find ourselves back in corridors all too soon, but even enclosed spaces encourage experimentation, with multiple routes affording a level of flexibility that feels distinctly un-*Killzone*.

In a welcome change for one of the brownest series on the market, there's a good deal of environmental variety, too, with sun-dappled forests, gleaming cityscapes, space stations with the lens flare set to JJ Abrams, and the crumbling Helghan capital, where *Shadow Fall* is at its most tense. It sees you creeping through the rubble while evading hulking mech walkers, aerial drones and spider mines, using the Tactical Echo to pinpoint their locations and plan your next panicked move. It's at times like these that *Shadow Fall* feels like

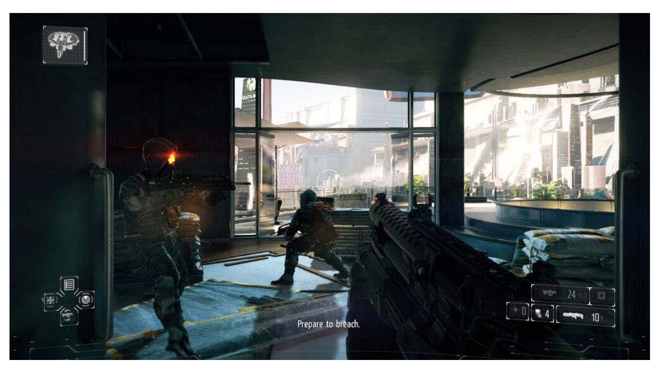
ABOVE While the OWL's a valuable aid in combat, a cooldown meter prevents you from spamming your way to victory. If it's recharging, it won't revive you if you fall, either. LEFT Tap up on the D-pad and an objective marker will appear. Well, most of the time, anyway. The key to victory in this section is ignoring the infantry and focusing on the walkers – something that's only relayed to you through dialogue drowned out by the gunfire



BELOW While you'll often want to save up adrenaline packs for OWL revives, they're also useful in combat. We're particularly fond of using one indoors with a shotgun to clear a room without taking a hit



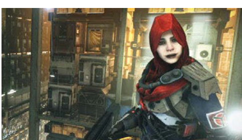
ABOVE More open environments means more screenshot opportunities – expect DualShock 4's Share button to get quite the workout. Vistas like this show that Guerrilla isn't just full of leaders in tech – it has great artists, too



a step forward in more than processing power. The new controller helps greatly, too, its reduced deadzone and improved triggers in particular doing much to tighten up the often woolly gunplay of previous games.

Shadow Fall's problems, then, stem not from controls, mechanics or linearity, but from pacing and execution. All too frequently the game shudders to a halt while you babysit something slow-moving. One level has you spending several minutes moving a succession of huge cranes to reach a distant objective. Another puts you in a space-bound dogfight, fending off waves of TIE fighter-like enemies with a huge cannon, but you're protecting an NPC in a shipping container that moves at a slug's pace. The descent into that broken Helghan city should have been one of the game's finest moments – you breach the planet's orbit, dip into the clouds and the screen goes grey, then black, and when you emerge into daylight the city is breaking up beneath you. The trial-and-error instadeath freefall that follows is, however, perhaps *Shadow Fall*'s lowest ebb.

Multiplayer's not much better, and is a rare area in which *Shadow Fall* suffers technically, the action slowing to a crawl when things get busy thanks to an unlocked framerate. Warzone, the main gametype, combines FPS standards such as Team Deathmatch with riffs on Capture The Flag and Domination. It's a good idea, especially for a game that is never going to match *Battlefield* or *Call Of Duty* for player counts: it makes sense to keep a slender playerbase in the same mode, rather than let them spread themselves out across several. A lack of in-game voice chat, however, is a baffling omission that makes effective teamwork almost impossible unless you're in party chat with friends.



MARK ECHO

As Kellan, you'll be on your lonesome for most of *Shadow Fall*'s campaign. You'll clean house with the odd squad of Shadow Marshals, but the only significant NPC to cross your path is Echo, a half-Helghan, half-Vektan who epitomises the racial tension that lies at the story's core. As the daughter of Hera Visari, ruler of the Helghast half of Vekta City, she starts out as Helghan's answer to Kellan, but you find yourselves sharing common ground as the line between good and evil blurs later on. One late-game mission feels like playing a co-op campaign as you mark targets for her to snipe from above, before the roles reverse and you're given the best sniper rifle in the game. It's a fine change of pace that feels like a sly and subversive poke at *Call Of Duty*'s follow-the-leader campaigns.

At first, class-specific tech seems to add a great deal of tactical nuance to multiplayer, but Spawn Beacons are too important to ignore. Little wonder: saving yourself the jog from base to objective can make all the difference

It's especially frustrating given Warzone's constant moving of the goalposts – even if you do manage to work with your team to lock down an area, you're just minutes from the gametype shifting and moving your objectives to the other side of the map. Each team has a single spawn point, its immediate vicinity protected by motion-sensing turrets, but there's nothing to stop an enemy camping out round the corner and shooting you in the back as you sprint off towards the latest distant objective. Deployable spawn beacons go some way to alleviating that frustration, but often mean that the maps' sprawl and elevation are wasted as the action clusters around a few square metres. A selection of class-specific tech – drones, sentries, cloaking devices that force you to use a knife – adds much-needed variety, but it speaks volumes that every gun is unlocked from the start. Multiplayer is merely an addendum to the singleplayer star of the show.

The campaign, despite its pacing problems, some poor checkpointing and Guerrilla's traditionally patchy dialogue, is the best day-one showcase of the new PlayStation's capabilities. It's first and foremost a firework display, an extravagant demonstration of next-gen processing power made by one of the most technically able studios in the business. It also happens to be a serviceable FPS. It's one that takes a few welcome steps forward for *Killzone* – with more open environments and, thanks to the OWL, greater mechanical flexibility – but leaves the genre exactly where it was. Here's hoping that as the generation matures, the Helghast and their ilk get smarter.

6

Post Script

Why Shadow Fall's disappointing AI is indicative of a wider malaise

About halfway through *Shadow Fall*'s campaign, you and Echo, your NPC companion, hold down an elevated position at the end of a map. Echo has hacked a couple of mech walkers, and you're tasked with directing their fire against a few of their own kind, which are slowly clunking their way towards you. While your robotic helpers reload, you fend off infantry with a sniper rifle. These grunts keep on coming, spawning endlessly at the far end of the arena, charging down the same strips of open ground. You snipe a handful, turn your attention to the walkers for a few moments, then repeat the process. The enemy troops are oblivious to the fact that they're literally following in the footsteps of the dozens of their comrades whose heads you have popped off from across the map. They never learn.

When we talk about the best in videogame AI, we talk almost exclusively about old games. The 12-year-old *Halo* is still held up as a high-water mark of enemy behaviour; so is Monolith's *FEAR*, which came out eight years ago. The former had a varied array of fixed AI routines to suit its mix of enemy types. Your foes were predictable, sure, but every encounter was different – a puzzle in need of a solution. Specific actions produced specific results: kill an Elite, for example, and Grunts fall back. *FEAR*'s AI was, by contrast, celebrated for its unpredictability, with enemies that adapted to situations like humans in multiplayer matches. These are case studies for excellent AI, but with every passing year shooters seem to edge further away from best-in-class behaviours – and *Shadow Fall* is a case in point.

Early *Killzone* games were praised for their AI. Guerrilla's tech leads were frequent sights on the conference circuit, sharing how they'd squeezed believable enemy behaviour out of the tight confines of PlayStation 2 and 3. But *Shadow Fall*, with its endless stream of enemies practically lining themselves up in your rifle's sights, feels like a step backwards, despite the greater processing power that PS4 affords. When given the choice between a handful of smart enemies and wave after wave of dumb ones, Guerrilla chooses the latter option every time.

And they really are dumb. One of the first *Killzone*'s AI pillars was the way enemies evaluated their positions and moved tactically from one piece of cover to another. One of *Shadow Fall*'s most frequent sights, however, is an opponent leaving safe cover and running in front of your reticle. Gone, too, are the days when your foes would pin you down with suppressing fire, allowing their comrades to flank or rush your position. Now they shoot you once and then stop, politely giving you a second or two to work out where you've been shot from.

It's easy to see why improvement in enemy AI has stagnated. It's a resource-hungry process, but unlike hi-res textures and fancy visual effects, it can't be sold in screenshots. *Shadow Fall*'s broader level design may play a part, too: flanking is easier to implement, and more of a threat to players, in a network of corridors than it is in the open. But *Shadow Fall* is far from the only guilty party – the trend reaches back much further than the launch of Xbox One and PS4. The longer it continues, the more it invites the question of whether singleplayer shooters are becoming dumber by design.

> The biggest game in town is the dumbest shooter on the market, one of endlessly respawning enemy waves



When the first *Killzone* was announced, it was both positioned and interpreted as PlayStation's answer to Xbox's *Halo*. Little wonder, then, that AI was the focus: it needed to be seen to be in step with the competition, and AI was *Halo*'s USP. These days, *Call Of Duty* is king, and its success has nothing to do with believable, intelligent enemy behaviour. The biggest game in town is the dumbest shooter on the market, one of endlessly respawning waves of brainless enemies. They shoot once, then stop. They run from cover to cover in plain sight, with no regard for their own safety, in order to let you know where they are. *COD*'s challenge comes not from your enemies' intelligence, but their number. The parallels between it and *Shadow Fall* are obvious.

But *Killzone* is misguided in following this leader. *COD*'s functional AI serves as a gentle introduction to its mechanics and as a warm-up for the hundreds of hours Infinity Ward or Treyarch expect you to spend in the multiplayer game. It's teaching you core skills: how to quickly identify where you were just shot from and how to react speedily to an enemy running across open ground. You learn that you shouldn't get cocky when outnumbered, that you must retreat behind cover to let your health recharge when hit, and that you need to get up and move quickly when a grenade falls at your feet. It is a six-hour multiplayer tutorial dressed up as a blockbuster campaign, and is entirely in keeping with the pace of the multiplayer, where encounters are brief and he who shoots first typically emerges victorious. *Killzone*, with its slower pace, requires a different approach, but its singleplayer AI encourages the same sort of fire-and-forget tactics. You just have to hold the trigger down longer to account for bigger health bars.

Perhaps it's simply a matter of focus. Pre-existing AI routines are no good in a game that eschews the maze of corridors of yore in favour of more open level design, that expands the player's tactical options with the OWL drone and that at least tries to make stealth a viable option – and all while setting a visual benchmark for a new generation of console hardware. With all that going on, perhaps it's little wonder the Helghast are so easily confused. But it's another instance of FPS AI being sacrificed at the altar of scope and spectacle. ■

Ryse: Son Of Rome

R*yse: Son Of Rome*'s creators know history, but don't really care about it. History is a disposable thing, valuable for setting the scene or establishing villains, but discarded in favour of fantasy the minute it gets in the way of telling a ripping yarn. Similarly, there's evidence that *Ryse*'s development team knows about innovation in game design, but doesn't really care about that, either. After all, all that fighting just gets in the way of showing you fantasy spectacles more beautiful than any yet rendered in a game.

Such is the detail in the game's architecture and the respect for costume design that it's impossible to imagine Crytek wasn't aware that there was never a giant chain boom barring entry to the beaches at Dover, or horn-headed wildmen north of Hadrian's Wall. Nero's sons never committed foppish regicide in Britain and Boudica never took her fight to the streets of Rome atop a war elephant, either. History is where *Ryse* starts before the gods intervene in legionary Marius Titus's life and he embarks on a ten-year quest for revenge across fantasy versions of Rome, England and Scotland.

Ryse's locations are a Hollywoodised version of the real thing, and the game proudly wears its influences like a badge of honour. The White Cliffs Of Dover rise hundreds of feet above Titus as he storms England's beaches in scenes torn from Saving Private Ryan. English forests house treetop villages for a fight that's as much Prince Of Thieves as it is Ridley Scott's Robin Hood. An English castle town is the site of Titus's own Battle Of Helm's Deep, with armies numbering in the tens of thousands stretching into the distance. Scotland becomes the setting for *Ryse*'s survival-horror stage: a Sleepy Hollow wilderness where twisted trees mask the movements of blood-drenched savages who sacrifice a Roman general in the head of a giant wicker man. The Colosseum becomes a transforming stage on which Titus battles Emperor Nero's son, despite being poisoned and surrounded. Are you not entertained?

It's historical fantasy on a frankly ludicrous scale, and all rendered at a level of detail and intricacy that borders on photorealism. There are rare moments in close-up, when Titus removes his helmet or touches another character, where the action passes for a movie sequence featuring real-life humans. While the most extreme of close-ups occur only in cutscenes, the game chases reality and almost achieves it, even in the thick of action, but only up to the point where it abandons the photoreal in favour of the fantasy-real. *Ryse* takes the same approach to reality that it does to history.

Reality, says *Ryse*, is boring; instead, Britain and Rome are exaggerated until ancient Europe is more like Peter Jackson's Middle-earth. It's all the better for it, because the worlds *Ryse* creates are the main event at a show held together by the most rudimentary combat system. This is *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s combat stripped of its most arresting embellishments, with a sword slash in place of Batman's punches and kicks, a shield bash in lieu of a cape, an evasive roll, a counter and a thrown pilum instead of the Batarang. It's a satisfying but simple toolset that does just barely enough to give players something to do on the way from Point A to Point Spectacular.

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Crytek
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

These are simple systems laid end to end and linked only by a whisper of a story and hyperbolic art design

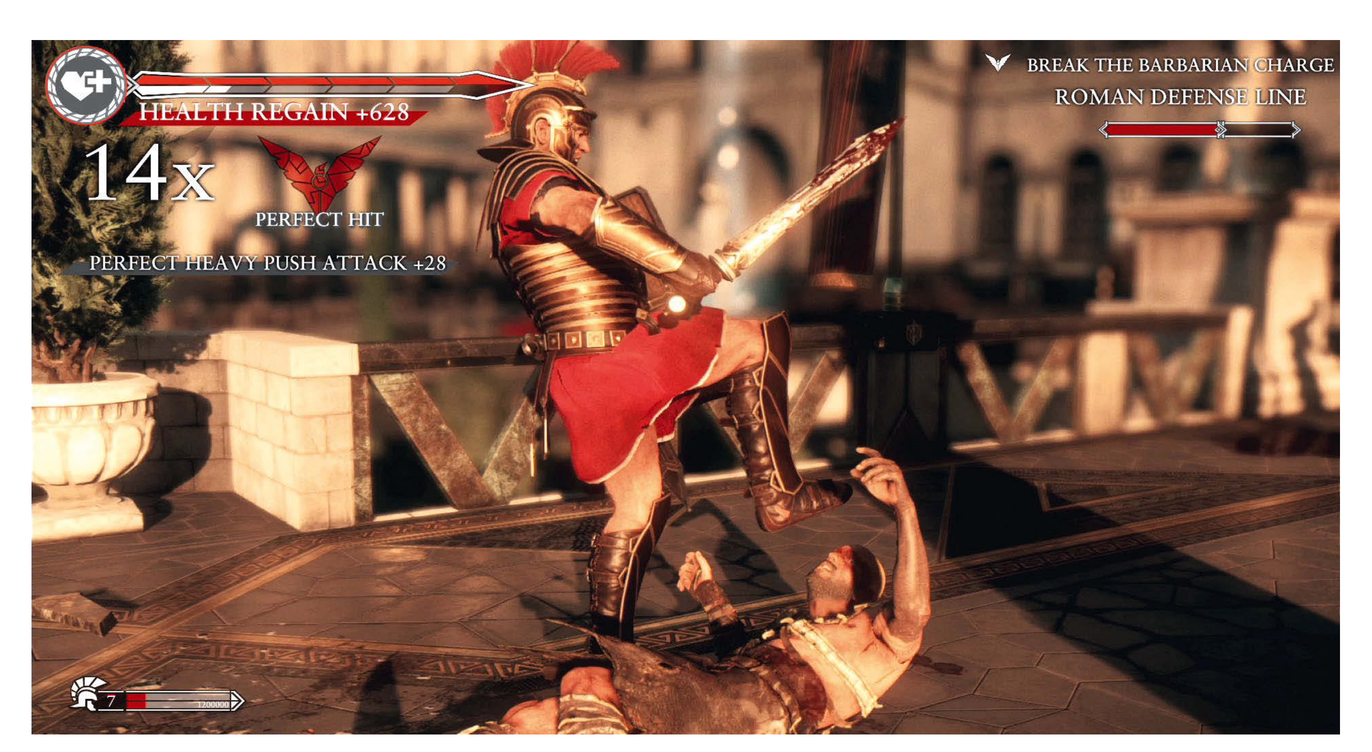


Combat is what you do when you're not being blown away by the next vista or tiny detail. It's only just complex enough to demand an element of skill, and it remains mechanically flat throughout – the game's final battles are no trickier than its first – but *Ryse* is a game of thrust and parry and brutal QTE execution that's satisfying in its efficiency and brutality. A perfectly timed parry feels right, the execution of a troublesome enemy feels cathartic, and Titus grows so powerful so quickly that any difficulty in pressing on to the next thing Crytek wants to show you is negligible.

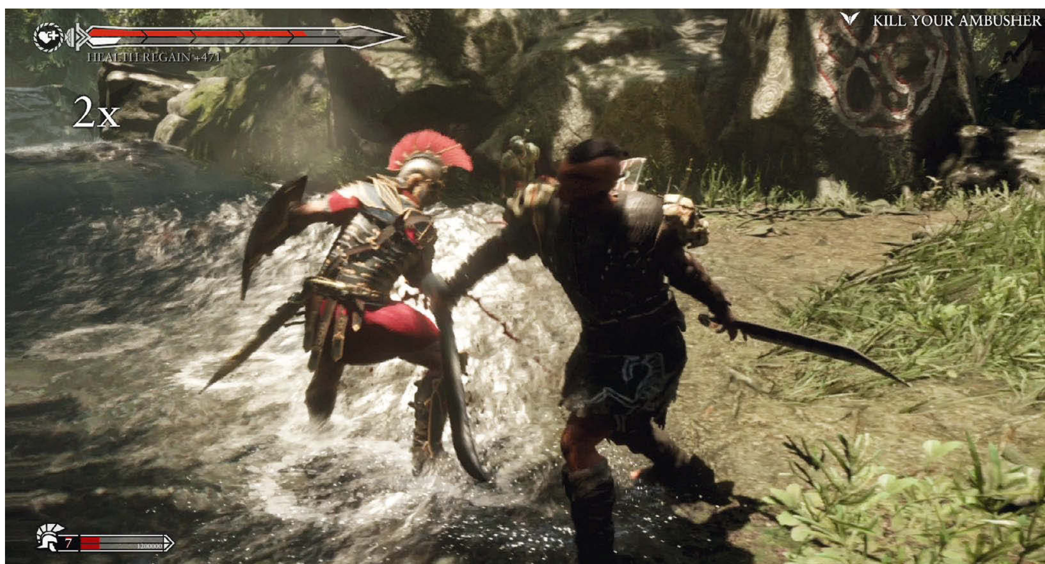
To be clear, this isn't Microsoft's *God Of War*. Rather, it's *Call Of Duty* with a sword, right down to the set-pieces where Titus mans a rapid-firing scorpio, holds a defensive line against incoming hordes, or pushes forward not to take down an anti-air gun but a siege engine. These moments are littered throughout the campaign, as if Crytek knows it has to do more to keep players interested than parry-thrust-repeat, and the cheap trick works. It's rare you're doing the same thing for more than a few minutes in *Ryse*, always dashing from combat to slow-marching testudo to scorpio to siege to boss fight. These are simple systems laid end to end and linked only by a whisper of a story and hyperbolic art design.

Ryse evinces no care for history, innovation of design, photorealism or a great many other things, but Crytek cares dearly about art and the technology powering it. For all the simplicity of its mechanics, *Ryse*'s artistry is second to none. Crytek is home not just to Europe's best technical minds, it seems, but to some of its finest videogame artists, too. Even with its constant cribbing from Hollywood, there has never been a game world of such striking beauty, variety or detail. It's a monumental piece of world-building that sets the standard for videogame fantasy in much the same way *Gears Of War* established its own precedents during the previous generation. Like the first *Gears*, *Ryse* is a simple game loaded with small-scale encounters and rudimentary set-pieces with the intention of hustling you towards something beautiful. Both have their own 'horror' stage, both have sieges, both have stationary guns of sorts, and *Ryse*, like *Gears*, has room to grow if given the chance. The game has a decisive ending, but it also opens the window to something even more fantastical, offering greater scope for mechanical depth and further extraordinary visual extremes.

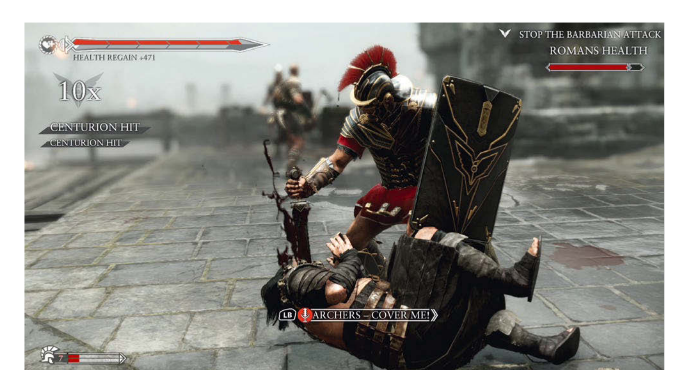
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ABOVE Combat in *Ryse* is just perfunctory combo followed by execution over and over again. Only by breaking things up with cinematic moments and action interludes does the game get away with its simple mechanics.
RIGHT *Ryse* adds shielded enemies, giant heavyweights and foes with two swords, but for the most part the game remains mechanically flat from beginning to end



BELOW Titus can be upgraded as you advance through the campaign, but XP is so readily available that you'll never be anything less than dramatically overpowered





ABOVE Turret sequences on the Scorpio are dotted throughout liberally, but last only briefly – bar one end-game sequence during a siege on Rome that goes on for minutes and seems designed to wear out your trigger finger

Post Script

Interview: Christopher Evans, technical art director; Peter Gornstein, cinematic director

By giving Xbox One its mandatory early visual showpiece – despite all the doomsaying about the hardware's horsepower – *Ryse* is arguably the console's most important launch title. It has disrupted the narrative, leaving many players clueless as to what the platform can really achieve. It's certainly hard to imagine more on day one in terms of presentation and ensemble performance capture. As technical art director **Christopher Evans** and cinematic director **Peter Gornstein** explain, achieving such results involved risks, experimentation and lots of research.

How long ago did you suspect that the new generation would start at sub-1080p?
Christopher Evans When we set out our pillars of the game very early, we didn't even think about what resolutions we were going to do. We really wanted to focus on the characters, the emotion. Those were things we'd never really conquered before. Resolution is more a gamble of numbers – a sliding thing for us. For the *Crysis* franchise, we'd built a really intelligent upscaler, and most people didn't even know it wasn't running at a specific resolution. We just felt that when you play the game and see the images that are generated, there's going to be another discussion happening.

Are those pillars different when dealing with a console launch title?
CE The tech core pillars are always built off of the game's core pillars. That meant we had to make a decision about the characters. For us, the next gen was going to be about having amazing characters in the game as well as in the cutscenes. That 'play the cutscene' idea really made us have to rethink. How are we going to do facial setup? How are we going to set up levels of detail? It was difficult enough that it ran the entire course of the project, and there were many times I was told that what we wanted to do for faces and characters was, tech-wise, one of the riskiest things on the project.

One of the things that I found myself defending a lot was the idea that, yeah, we're going to take tons of scan reference of the actors themselves and replicate their exact performance, but the characters are going to be sculpted by human beings [in] an artistic process. The world, the armour, the face: everything is consistent. It's not slapping a bunch of photo textures everywhere. When we did our facial scanning, we actually drew lines on the faces so I could check the skin sliding and stuff, so we didn't even have the actual scan data with diffuse textures for the project.

We did a lot of reference. We had a photo reference pipeline, we went to Italy, and we were able to pull meshes with normal maps and everything off of our reference photography. But in the end, it just looks really eerie. Sometimes, if you do 3D scanning of a face, you get a face that looks like a moving video, but then the world doesn't look like that. And you're not able to populate the world with all of that stuff.



Christopher Evans, technical art director



Peter Gornstein, cinematic director



Do you think the shock of inconsistent texture resolution should be a thing of the past now?
CE There's a couple of things that play into that. Number one is the fact that it's an artistic problem. We call that texel consistency. We have a way that we build the game where it shows everything as checkerboards, and a checkerboard has so many checks per metre, and if there's a stretched texture that makes it look lo-res, [then] it looks lo-res to us.

A lot of people are looking at the hardware on PS4 and Xbox One, and wherever I talk about that, I try to stress that hardware is hardware, and hardware right now outstrips teams' abilities to fill that RAM with assets. We have a team that's been building high-fidelity assets for a long time. I think that in the future the team makeup and the pipeline and process that the teams use are going to matter much more, because you're going to hit this problem where there's so much RAM. You want a pipeline that allows an artist to ZBrush that trashcan in the corner so that it's consistent with the awesome character and the awesome room and everything.

A lot of it is building outsourcing pipelines to let you build a prototype in-house and then build a pipeline – we built Marius's face in four months, and then we had to build 25 more in four months. And that's going to be the nut to crack.
Peter Gornstein It's almost like an aircraft assembly plant, right? You've got to find the vendors all around the world that are expert at making that part, and the real trick is making sure it fits in when everything gets assembled.

You've notably used prerendered cutscenes in *Ryse*. Why do that when the engine is so capable?
CE This is a funny thing for me, because my entire rigging pipeline is predicated on the idea that I have to build rigs that can blend in and out of cutscenes seamlessly. So I would go to Peter and the guys and say, "Hey, I see this loading video is now scheduled to be prerendered. Why?" We talked about it and it was, "Well, we don't want players to be waiting. If we're rendering a scene live as well as trying to load the next scene, the engine will take probably three or four times longer." In the end, we sided with the gamers. We didn't feel they should have to wait through a big loading time. ■

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Forza Motorsport 5

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Turn 10
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

The hallmarks of *Forza Motorsport* exist outside of the series' handling model, which goes so far beyond mechanical obsession that it captures the fantasy of driving supercars rather than just the maths that makes them work. The comprehensiveness of *Forza 4*'s featureset was second to none, meeting the needs of the extreme enthusiast and the most casual Sunday driver, but it's a featureset eviscerated to meet Xbox One's launch day. *Forza 5* is a game defined not by its options, but by the absence of them.

Forget the longed-for dynamic weather and night racing: on the way to the new generation, *Forza* has lost some 300 cars, over 20 locations and countless tracks, gaining versions of Spa-Francorchamps, Mount Panorama, Yas Marina and the city of Prague by way of small compensation. And by losing tracks, *Forza* loses the variety of racing that made it great. Without Fujimi Kaido, there is no touge racing; without drag strips, there can be no drag racing; with only one oval, there is no real Daytona; without the Nürburgring, there is no iconic endurance race; and without the beautiful Camino Viejo De Montserrat, there is no joy.

Montserrat was the showpiece of *Forza 3* – the moment sim racing stopped being po-faced – and losing it is endemic of a step back to the days when *Forza* had no car clubs where friends could share their hard-earned vehicles, where the UI was lumpen and slow, and where a sliver of content was stretched to breaking point and beyond. *Forza 5*'s 200 cars and 14 tracks make for a substantial package, but are limited enough that the game abandons the notion of offering free cars as awards, simply doling out credits instead. UI transitions are glacial and the Top Gear cutscenes unskippable, as if length were a substitute for *Forza*'s usual breadth. The game's campaign is divided into eight leagues, each with between three and seven race series, but it omits the usual event-list browser to obfuscate comparisons with its predecessors.

Criminally, *Forza 5* removes test driving of any kind and limits to just a handful the cars available in its Free Play mode. It's perhaps understandable that players might want to immediately leap into the Lotus F1 car making its series debut, but here it's locked behind six million credits' worth of racing, which means hours of laps around the same half-dozen locations. In previous *Forza*s, you might hire an AI driver to race on your behalf to scrape enough together for the more valuable cars, but not in *Forza 5*, where the feature has been cut. Yet *Forza 5*'s shortcomings aren't a result of bad design, but of tight deadlines.

The new features Turn 10 has found time to add, however, are *Forza* at its very best. The Drivatar system is the neatest psychological trick pulled in a racing game for quite some time, simply placing your friends' names above AI racers as the cars supposedly replicate their driving styles based on analysis of their races. 'Supposedly' because who can say how accurate the Drivatars are? And it doesn't matter – just seeing a friend's name above a car makes racing more personal and more exciting, and the AI seems more human and aggressive than before, so certainly something has changed, even if it's difficult to measure.

On the way to the new generation, Forza has lost some 300 cars, over 20 locations and countless tracks



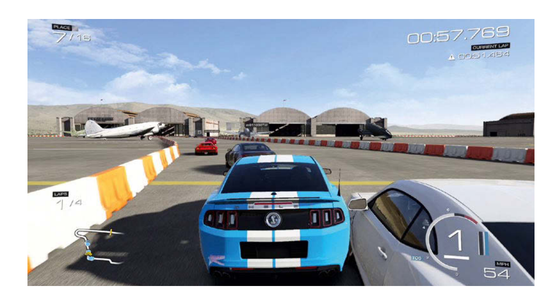
The new tracks, particularly the fantasy track of Prague – which in parts brings to mind racing on the European city circuits of *Project Gotham Racing 2* back in the early days of Xbox Live – are also as good as *Forza* has ever been, mixing race-friendly wide corners and steep climbs with close-up inner-city detail and long lines of sight from the hills. But it's only in the fictional city circuit where *Forza*'s new visual fidelity jumps off the screen, while upgraded racetracks such as Silverstone and Catalunya are as flat and lifeless now as they ever were. *Forza 4* was already so close an approximation of reality that the million-polygon models made possible by increased processing power for *Forza 5* offer only minimal returns. Reality, it seems, is a poor showman, and it's no wonder developers are returning to the fantasy and sci-fi genres to best show off the power of new consoles.

It all brings to mind *Project Gotham* in another way, too. Play *Forza 5* and you can't help thinking of *Project Gotham Racing 3* – Microsoft's flagship racer for Xbox 360's launch, stripped of courses, cars and features in the name of its HD makeover – and certainly this game is among the prettiest on either of the new platforms. *Forza 4* was gorgeous too, though, and the Xbox One makeover is too modest for its cost.

There is a menu option for the Forza Marketplace, but it hasn't yet been activated; presumably it's still being tested prior to launch. It's one of the countless features *Forza* players ordinarily expect that we've lost on the way to Xbox One. A quick list? There's no way to sell unused cars back to the AI or to other players, no bespoke onscreen speedometers, no test driving a car before purchase, no kid-friendly Kinect steering or Kinect support in Forzavista, no opportunity to load a circuit-specific tuning setup before a career race, no exiting from a race series without loading up the next track, no unicorn cars, no auction house, no storefront, and no surprise, really. *Forza 5* is a launch game with all the spectacle and disappointment we've come to expect from launch games. While the handling is still magic and the content on offer is substantial in a way, *Forza 5* is best seen as a foundation for what *Forza 6* will be in a couple of years' time. By comparison, this launch-day sampler will seem awfully limited, far from the hoped-for victory lap impossible on prior hardware. After all, it seems limited by comparison with *Forza 4* now.

7

RIGHT Despite having fewer tracks than *Forza 4*, several of the circuits here are bland. This airport is among them, but desert tracks are scarcely more interesting. When Turn 10 engages its imagination, though, the results are far better





ABOVE The new open-wheel cars, such as Ariel's Atom, are almost uniformly terrifying, even with their diverse handling. The F1 Lotus is a piece of precision engineering with neck-breaking brakes. The Atom is a 150mph shopping trolley.
LEFT The cockpit view is detailed but still the hardest way to drive. Turn 10 estimated only a few per cent of players drive in-cockpit, but those who do are apparently "delighted" by the experience



BELOW Prague and the Bernese Alps are *Forza 5*'s best-looking tracks by far. For years, Turn 10's track designers have been capable of building the world's best circuits when they are freed from the constraints imposed by reality



Dead Rising 3

Any fears that *Dead Rising* had sobered up for the new generation can be put out of mind. Within the first few hours, we've killed off an S&M cowboy on a sci-fi porn set and commandeered his phallic flamethrower to complete a cute cocktail-dress-and-Blanka-mask ensemble. It's clear from the off that Capcom Vancouver has done a fine job of retaining the series' personality while revelling in giving players more freedom – and more zombies – than ever before, but it has also transplanted much of *Dead Rising*'s rotten flesh.

Not its penchant for shopping malls, though. *Dead Rising 3*'s playground spans a city, and the introduction of Los Perdidos signals the series' abandonment of its Romero influences for more contemporary ones (its tumbling, cascading zombies, for example, bring to mind World War Z). The city itself is split into four areas, each linked by a mess of blockaded highways. It's no Los Santos, but it's a sizeable space that's bigger than both of the previous games' maps combined.

Thank goodness, then, for the liberal placement of drivable vehicles, and for new hero Nick Ramos's ability to sprint. In a game where staying still can be deadly, both prove essential to your survival, and demonstrate Capcom's desire to streamline the staccato movement of previous *Dead Risings*. Ramos can also grab weapons and items without breaking his stride, and consume food on the hoof. These may seem like only small enhancements, but in play they make managing the game's crowds of zombies a pleasure, not an ordeal.

And what crowds. Xbox One allows for something in the region of three times as many zombies onscreen as the last game, their looks procedurally generated and their bodies full of guts to expose through a flexible dismemberment system. One zombie is no threat at all, but when they gather, paths become clogged with hundreds of moaning undead, necessitating the use of wheelie bins and abandoned vehicles as stepping stones.

The price for so many foes is some visual instability. The environments, crowds and lighting effects occasionally cohere into something to show off the host platform, but too often the engine shambles about with its texture-popping guts on show. Objects and road markings sometimes appear out of nowhere, while prominent textures flip between resolutions gracelessly. Such compromises mean the game maintains a steady 30fps (once you've downloaded the day-one patch), even during busy scenes, and once you're playing there are no loading times to interrupt your journey.

Mechanically, things are more sound. *Dead Rising 2*'s combo weapon system is back, refreshed by Capcom's effort to make everything flow. Weapons can now be combined anywhere; hold RB to bring up your inventory wheel, select an item and tap A to hastily cobble together something that's even more dangerous than its constituent parts. Schematics for combo weapons are strewn across the city, their locations marked on the map – always found lying conveniently next to the ingredients you need – and include familiar items from the previous game and many more new ones. One highlight is the Dragon Punch, which is constructed by bolting a motorcycle engine to a pair of boxing gloves and deployed with a cry of "Shoryuken!"

Thanks to his day job as a mechanic, Ramos is also pretty handy with vehicles, and greatly expands on Chuck Greene's modified bikes. With the right schematics to hand, any vehicle can be combined with any other, most featuring a turret for co-op partners. And food can also be combined to create tonics. Mixing cabbage and soda makes you inexplicably immune to zombie grapples for a limited time, while vodka and sushi allows you to incinerate foes with fiery breath.

As is tradition, survivors can be found around the city. Most of them will set you a task, and join you once you've run their errands. They can still be killed, but will look after themselves for the most part, and if you keep them alive you'll be able to call on their services from any of the safe houses around the city, from which you can access your ever-expanding weapons cache, garage of vehicles and wardrobe.

As before, Ramos levels up by accruing Prestige Points. These are handed out for finding collectables; killing zombies; taking part in Survival Training challenges, which task you with killing a target number of zombies under specific conditions; and defeating optional Psycho missions, which are essentially mini-bosses. As you level up, you'll gain Attribute Points to be spent on more combo categories and bolstering Ramos' abilities. With so much to do, Capcom has removed the suffocating time pressure of past games. The clock is still ticking down, but it's slow enough to let you to take on every side mission. Nightmare mode, however, removes checkpoints, requires you to save in bathrooms and enforces a much tighter time limit.

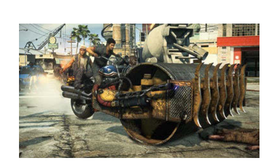
For all its innovation, *Dead Rising 3*'s bosses – both the mandatory storyline encounters and the Psycho missions – remain a frustrating low point. Even with your new-found abilities, boss fights feel awkward and unfair. Controls that work well when navigating through the lumbering undead come unstuck against more agile foes, or even track-mounted robotic arms, as one particularly hateful and drawn-out encounter proves.

But even these charismatic roadblocks can't quite derail an ambitious overhaul of the series that offers more than enough incentive for you to endure its less progressive design choices. *Dead Rising 3* is a sandbox in the purest sense, one that urges you to experiment with its innumerable toys at your leisure. The result is an open world that, in spite of its reanimated inhabitants, feels more alive than most.

8

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Capcom Vancouver
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

Within hours, we've killed off an S&M cowboy on a sci-fi porn set and taken his phallic flamethrower



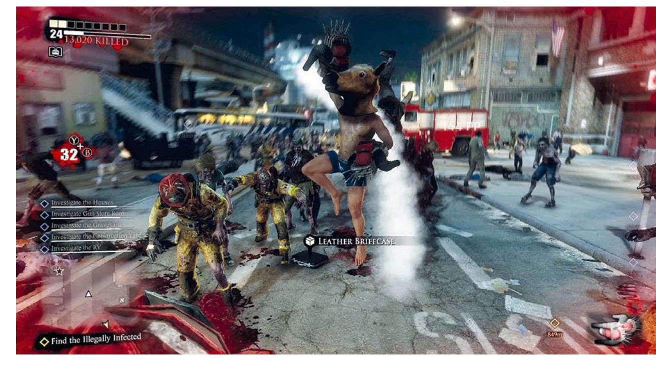
GRAVE EXPRESSION
The bold "Better with Kinect" claim might not have survived the generational transition, but *Dead Rising 3* makes novel use of Xbox One's much-derided peripheral. Rather than issue commands to your survivors through the D-pad, you can simply point at the screen and shout, "Go over there." Dutifully, your allies will obey you almost all of the time. You can also use the Kinect mic against enemies: call out to zombies and a blue circle will emanate from your position, attracting all nearby undead. And you can taunt the sexually deviant psychopathic bosses, who fly into an uncontrollable rage when dealt the sick burns suggested onscreen, such as the withering, "You're crazy!"



Vehicle handling is much improved compared with *Dead Rising 2*, though it still retains a certain stodginess. Things get even more difficult when zombies get under the wheels or clamber on top



ABOVE The raw ingredients for combo vehicles, much like their weapon equivalents, are almost always found next to each other. This little number boosts through crowds, and can play a part in a distorted recreation of ET





ABOVE *Dead Rising 3* is full of references to other Capcom games, including the Mega Man outfit you earn for completing the game once. But our favourite is the Dragon Punch, which takes on new life in the midst of an undead crowd. LEFT Every weapon has a standard and strong attack, with combo weapons reserving the latter for showboating excess. Zombie dismemberment is grotesquely detailed, too, making experiments with different methods of slicing and dicing enduringly entertaining

Need For Speed Rivals

Publisher EA
Developer Ghost Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

N*eed For Speed: Hot Pursuit*'s greatest contribution to seamless play was Autolog; for follow-up *Most Wanted*, it was EasyDrive. *Rivals'* intended equivalent is AllDrive, a system that transplants players into other drivers' games in service of Ghost Games' goal of "destroying the boundary between single- and multiplayer". It might have worked, too, if the challenges of developing a next- and cross-gen game hadn't so sorely hobbled *Rivals'* potential.

The payoff is that *Rivals* is beautiful on PS4, Xbox One and PC – all three versions were tested for this review – taking full advantage of DICE's Frostbite 3 tech. Redview County combines elements of California and Europe, resulting in a diverse environment that even occasionally recalls *OutRun*. Expansive dust-blown desert tracks, tightly wound snow-covered tarmac and bucolic vineyards all sit within a few miles of each other, but somehow cohere into a naturalistic world. Cars shimmer with surface moisture as the space around them fills with leaves, snow, rain or whichever other particle effect is being shown off. And the day/night cycle and dynamic weather system transform the world to such an extent that you'll trek back to some places just to see them under new conditions.

Ghost Games' debut feels like an amalgamation of Criterion's previous two *Need For Speeds* – and no wonder, given that 80 per cent of Criterion joined Ghost earlier this year – though *Hot Pursuit*'s influence is more keenly felt. *Rivals* has brought *Most Wanted*'s open-world design and EasyDrive into the mix, but its urban sprawl has been abandoned in favour of *Hot Pursuit*'s sinuous country roads and weighty handling model. You can choose between Cop and Racer careers, too, switching allegiances whenever you want, your progress dictated by the completion of Speedlists, a selection of tasks themed around three driving styles.

Whichever faction you pick, the map is bristling with challenges, triggered by pulling up to the relevant junction or roadway and tapping a button. Hot Pursuit, Interceptor and Time Trial events are shared by both sides, while bespoke events are limited to one. Racers can trigger head-to-heads with AI or human drivers, while Cops can begin ad-hoc pursuits by simply switching on their sirens near a Racer, or take on Rapid Response missions, which require quick, clean drives.

A new risk-reward mechanic makes the Racer career the more exciting of the two. You still amass Speed Points (SP) for racing, bombing through speed cameras and terrorising other drivers with near misses, but now you must bank them at Hideouts dotted across the map. The longer you stay on the road, the higher your Heat level (and multiplier, up to a maximum of 10x) gets, and the more SP you'll earn for feats of wheelmanship. The problem is, you'll also become a more valuable target, and if you're busted, you'll lose the lot. It's an excellent system, one that adds to the irresistible sense of misbehaviour while you're on the road.

Expansive dust-blown tracks, tightly wound tarmac and bucolic vineyards all sit within miles of each other



The Cop career is more pedestrian, since you're never in jeopardy of losing SP, nor is there ever any risk that your events will be interrupted – whereas a Racer's time trial could spontaneously become a car chase, too, if you're unfortunate enough to attract the attention of a patrol car en route. As well as SP gained from events, you'll also confiscate it from Racers, those with higher Heat levels yielding greater hauls. But there's something inherently less satisfying about chasing down AI Racers when compared with escaping AI Cops.

Somewhere in among all this, buried beneath the obligatory particle effects and a bundle of frustratingly underpolished systems, there's a classic racing game. But you'll have to wade through so many annoyances to get to it that its pleasures erode quickly. It starts with the small niggles, such as the fact that the GPS system doesn't reroute if you move closer to, say, another Repair Shop than the one you initially set. But there are more fundamental problems in play.

Rivals' fictional Redview County is both beautiful and expansive, but AllDrive limits you to the company of just five other players at a time. The result is that, on a server populated by strangers at least, you'll rarely cross paths with a human driver. You can set a GPS route to someone, but the EasyDrive drop-down menu doesn't give any clue as to who's nearest, or whether they're playing as a Cop or a Racer. Unless you're using the second-screen Need For Speed Network app, this means you have to dip into the main map; the game can't be paused, so this leaves you unable to steer your car, putting your precious SP at risk. And once you've hared along the roadway to try to meet up, you might find they've already entered a Hideout to bank their SP.

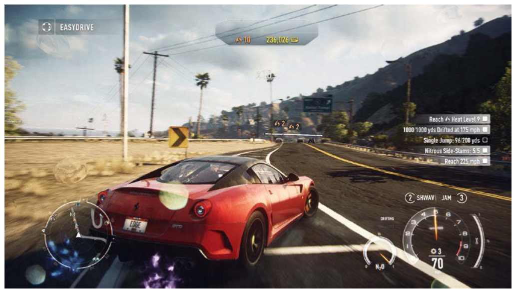
Playing with friends improves things significantly; a little communication lets you take advantage of the fact that every event in the game can be undertaken cooperatively. But this rather undermines the promise of AllDrive. Autolog seamlessly delivers new challenges and maintains an atmosphere of social competition, but AllDrive's limitations force you to seek out your own fun. Ghost has tried to compensate by filling Redview's roads with AI drivers, but they only serve to highlight how rarely you'll interact with other players.

These all-too-rare occasions spent enjoying *Rivals'* skillfully engineered handling alongside someone else offer confirmation of Ghost's ambitious vision for a new *Need For Speed*. But outside of them, dazzling 1080p visuals, astonishing weather effects and a sense of competition feel like too high a price to pay for such a profound dip in the series' mechanical polish. *Rivals'* systems show potential, but it is considerably less than the game it might have been.

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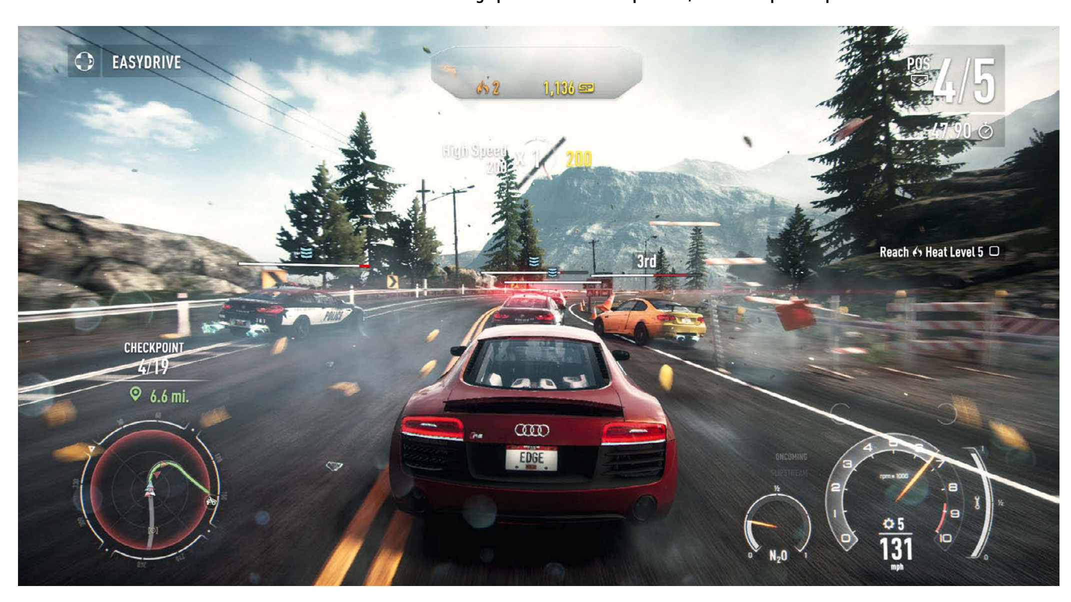






ABOVE Drifting is satisfying, but too often the game failed to recognise our efforts when trying to do a Speedlist task that wanted us to break traction. Switching Speedlists solves the problem, but also wipes completed tasks

TOP Pursuit tech can be offensive or defensive, and anyone who has played *Hot Pursuit* or *Most Wanted* will recognise the lineup. Once bought, you can upgrade tech through three levels to make yourself deadly on the road.
ABOVE *Rivals*' lighting effects are captivating, while car models oscillate between photorealism and somewhere just shy of it. It's all helped along by a dynamic weather system that provides a backdrop of uncommon drama for a racer.
RIGHT *Hot Pursuit*'s simplified mirror view has been reduced even further to representations of cars only. It's perfectly functional, but it's one of many glimpses of *Rivals* hitting technical hurdles



Killer Instinct

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Double Helix
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

We're starting to suspect that particle effects are part of the platform holders' next-gen developer terms. *Killer Instinct* is full of them, its stages saturated with torrential rain and heavy snowstorms, its characters flinging projectiles and twirling batons that emit showers of sparks. When two fireballs meet and cancel out, the resulting particle geyser briefly obscures the screen. And this will be a familiar sight given Double Helix's business model.

Killer Instinct is a free download and free to play, but you only get one character gratis. Jago is the Ryu of the piece, with a moveset that mimics the *Street Fighter* star – a fireball, flying uppercut and spinning kick, plus a katana slash – making him a natural choice for a free character. A further five are available for a small fee (the same business model applies to the game's half-dozen stages), with a $40 outlay getting you the whole lot in one go. Two more fighters will be added after launch, but for the time being you can expect to see an awful lot of Jago mirror matches. Fireballs will meet, sparks will fly, and ennui will quickly set in. Any *Street Fighter* aficionado will tell you that a Ryu mirror match, while one of the most fascinating matchups in the game at a high level, makes for tiresome viewing when less skilled players are at the controls. That applies here as well, but Double Helix has devised a smart battle system that will let even beginners pull off flashy, extended combos, while ensuring the more skilled will generally triumph.

Special moves are split into two types – one used to begin or sustain a combo, and the other to end it. Jago's Wind Kick and Laser Sword serve as Openers and Linkers, while his Endokuken fireball and Tiger Fury uppercut are Enders. Land an Opener and any two subsequent button presses will continue the combo; add a Linker and the cycle can be repeated, but not indefinitely. A meter beneath the combo counter fills as you land hits. Once it is over 90 per cent full, a further repetition will bring the combo to an abrupt end. And while you've been landing hits, a chunk of your foe's health bar has been turning white. This is Potential Damage, which will only be taken off if you finish the combo with an Ender. It's an excellent concept full of interlocking systems that benefit beginners more than any comeback mechanic ever could – as Jago you can mash the Spin Kick input and hammer medium kick for a ten-hit combo, but it won't do much damage unless you have the presence of mind to tag on an Ender.

Potential Damage is just one of a host of little mechanics woven into the combat system with more skilled players in mind. The Super Combo equivalent is the Shadow Special, an extra button press adding a flurry of extra hits to a standard special move, and these can also be used as Openers, Linkers or Enders. There's the Combo Breaker, activated by tapping your two light, medium or heavy attacks at the same time when your opponent is pressing a button of the corresponding strength. Get it right and you'll knock your opponent down; get it wrong and you're put in Lockdown state, an exclamation mark over your head while you're prohibited from attempting another Breaker for three seconds. Tap both heavy attacks for Instinct Mode, a 15-second power boost that extends block- and hit-stun on all your moves and can also be used to cancel a move's animation frames after it's connected or been blocked, extending combos or correcting mistakes.

> You can expect to see an awful lot of Jago mirror matches. Fireballs will meet, sparks will fly, and ennui will set in

Yet as thoughtfully put together as the combo system is, clearly it's nothing that wouldn't have been possible on older technology. In fact, strip away the particles and there's little to *Killer Instinct* that feels new. Sure, it runs at 60fps, but so do its 360 and PS3 equivalents, and it does so only in 720p. Character models whiff of the previous generation – Jago's hairdo is supposed to be spiky, but not jaggy – and stage backgrounds similarly fail to make a compelling case for Xbox One's processing power. One mountain range backdrop looks disappointingly flat, but even the more enclosed stages are let down by drab, low-detail scenery.

Most disappointing of all is how little meat there is on these intricate bones. Even with the Ultra Combo Pack, which unlocks all available characters and stages, repetition quickly sets in. Each fighter is different – Orchid an up-close whirlwind of batons and kicks; Glacius's ice attacks best used from range; Sabrewulf's Run move, with its multiple endings, keeps an opponent guessing – but they're united by the combo system to the point of sameyness. Since normal moves play the same role in combos whoever you choose, there's no need to learn a fighter's entire moveset. Learn their special moves, their Ultra finisher and you're away.

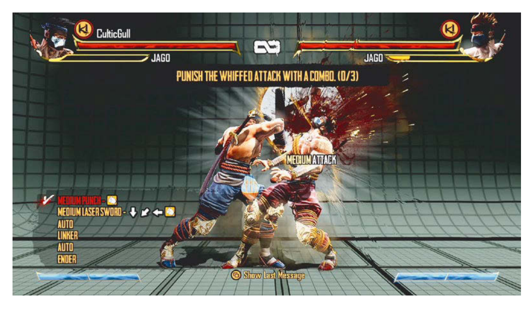
Those afraid to venture online will find the singleplayer component lacking, too. A 40-stage Dojo tutorial is pitched as not only an introduction to *Killer Instinct* but its genre as a whole, yet the former comes first. You're asked to perform extended combos before being walked through fighting game basics such as cross-ups and reversals. An Arcade mode will only be added once the roster has expanded to eight fighters; in the meantime, you'll have to make do with a Survival mode that partially refills your health after each victory.

Fighting games live or die online nowadays, but *Killer Instinct*'s business model dictates that Jago will be your most frequent opponent. Double Helix intends to rotate which fighter is offered for free, but that will only go so far with so slender a roster. There's a fantastic combo system at *Killer Instinct*'s core, but right now it feels like half a game – one full of promise, certainly, but not an especially next-gen one either. The cascade of particles may not be enough to retain player interest until the rest of the game arrives.

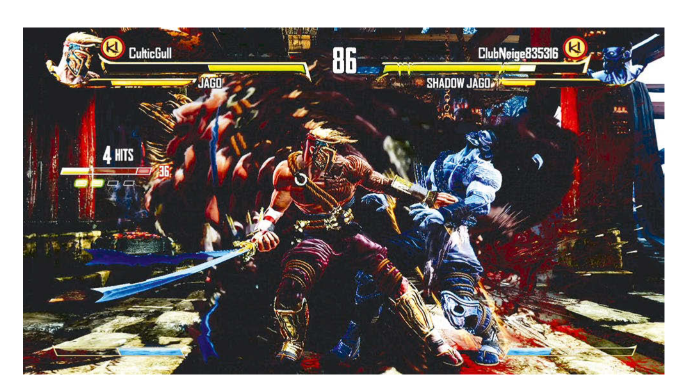
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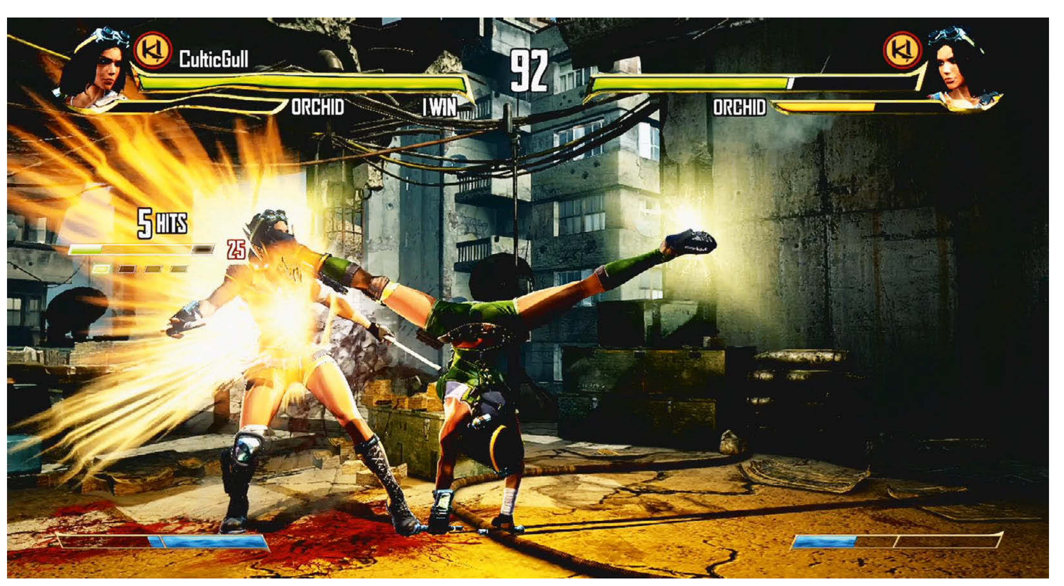
ULTRA PARTY
Killer Instinct's gravelly voiced announcer saves his greatest excitement for the Ultra Combo, which is brought over from Rare's arcade original. There's no meter to fill: all you need to do is whittle your foe's health bar to less than 15 per cent. Start a combo then input a single special-move motion with all three punches or kicks and your fighter will let fly with an extended flurry of attacks, with syncopated drumbeats adding to the spectacle. It's a needlessly flashy way to round off a fight, and at odds with the intricacy of the combo system, but the announcer seems to enjoy it.



ABOVE This isn't the first fighting game to use its tutorial to teach you things that apply to the genre as a whole – *Skullgirls* did a fine job of it last year – but Dojo mode is commendably deep for a high-profile release







TOP Shadow Moves are simpler to pull off than many other games' equivalents. Simply press two buttons after a special move input and you'll perform one. They're not just for show, either, forming a vital part of the combo system. **ABOVE** Ultra Combos may be a flashy way of finishing off an opponent, but even they can be cancelled using Instinct Mode, which resets the combo limiter. By the time Jago fell to the floor here, he'd taken 51 successive hits. **LEFT** Mirror matches are inevitable whether you play online or off. The six-strong roster has technically already swollen to seven, although Shadow Jago is just a palette swap for the fighter given away with certain Xbox Live subscriptions

Bravely Default

Publisher Nintendo/Square Enix
Developer Silicon Studio
Format 3DS
Release Out now (EU/JP), early 2014 (NA)

That Square Enix should choose to release a spiritual successor to *Final Fantasy* spinoff *The 4 Heroes Of Light* with a title as unwieldy as *Bravely Default* says much for how far the publisher's biggest star has fallen. Presumably the intent was to avoid this new JRPG – from *3D Dot Game Heroes* creator Silicon Studio – being tainted by association, but it's hard to avoid the similarities. You'll meet White, Black and Red Mages; drink Ether to replenish Magic Points; and use Phoenix Down to revive fallen allies. This is a new *Final Fantasy* game in all but name, and that being the case, it's comfortably the best since *FFXII*.

Its title refers directly to its battle system, and you'll soon understand why. This is the fulcrum around which the game turns – it's a game of daring advances and strategic retreats, of risking all in a glorious assault or playing the defensive long game before striking suddenly with brutal force. At the start of each turn, you make your choice. Pick Brave and you can stack up to four moves, using physical and magical attacks, summoning allies or dipping into your supply of items. Yet you'll deplete your stock of Brave Points and be unable to move again until the counter ticks back round to zero. Opt for Default, however, and you'll bank a Brave Point per turn, also earning a defensive boost. A few turns of holding back and you may be able to launch a bold counteroffensive across two consecutive rounds, but by then it may be too late.

It's a simple system that's intuitive and easy to parse, yet astonishingly deep, flexible and delightfully tactical. Very few enemies here feel like cannon fodder. Even weaker opponents are capable of dealing out significant damage, enough to ensure you'll want to be well stocked with potions and have one of your four-strong party learn the Cura spell. It's combined with a Job system that allows each character to master several abilities, their current Job bolstered by support skills learned in a previous role. So you can have a Knight who moonlights as a healer, or a Summoner with a sideline in stat-boosting songs. In the late game, you might see a vampire Ninja fighting side by side with a pirate Thief, and the flexibility afforded you by such a wide range of possible skillsets makes each random encounter something to relish. For once, you'll be glad of the interruptions, even if they do come less frequently than in many of *Bravely Default*'s peers.

Besides, it's another opportunity to admire some of the finest creature art on 3DS. A grotesque sandworm heaves and shudders, while a skeletal guard's jaw slackens as it scratches its exposed spine with the tip of its rusted blade. If the painterly aesthetic of *The 4 Heroes Of Light* was held back by the hardware, then *Bravely Default* makes the most of a more powerful portable. At times it feels like you're strolling through a gallery of exceptional concept art, and Silicon Studio takes every opportunity to show it off. Idle for more than a few seconds and the camera will retreat to a wider view of your current location, delicately dollying towards your party leader as you thumb the Circle Pad. With a handful of exceptions, the game leans on fantasy archetypes for both its menagerie and its locations, yet these are no less vividly realised for their familiarity.

It's a simple battle system that's intuitive and easy to parse, yet astonishingly deep, flexible and tactical



The narrative is equally rich and detailed. It manages the rare trick of making the player aware that their quest is but a small part of a wider conflict without diminishing its significance. Your quartet of heroes is tasked with reviving four elemental crystals in an episodic journey that throws obstacles both predictable and unexpected into your path. The good-natured Tiz is a standard-issue hero, lionhearted and stubbornly noble; his is the most tragic backstory, since he's the lone survivor of a destroyed village, which must be rebuilt in an ongoing aside. Agnès, meanwhile, is the winsome wind vestal, bound by duty to reawaken the crystals. Which leaves Edea and Ringabel as the wild cards, the former defecting from the villainous forces chasing Agnès at the game's outset, and the latter offering an enigmatic twist on the amnesiac hero trope.

The scenarios are uncommonly dark at times and *Bravely Default* takes risks with its character arcs, too: as Agnès' burden begins to weigh heavy on her fragile shoulders, she develops a single-minded resolve that sees her abruptly dismiss any potential distractions, even as others plead for help. Extracurricular missions here are not inconsequential fetch quests, but fully ripened side stories that add to the world and its characters, with many featuring surprising plot developments and just about all of them offering new Job prospects as your reward for their completion. It's a pity that such strong narrative ideas are bludgeoned by a script that's never knowingly underwritten – wrongly surmising that one word won't suffice when you can use 27 instead – while the mannered and melodramatic delivery often undercuts the story's emotional beats. You can skip the cutscenes, though you'd miss enough of note that it would be unwise to do so.

That shouldn't, perhaps, be too much of a surprise, nor should a bloated runtime that wrongly equates length with value; this is a JRPG, after all, and much of this goes with the territory. But so refined is *Bravely Default* for the most part that its problems stand out all the more – and they're cumulatively enough to ensure that it falls just short of *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Persona 4: Golden* as the best of its class. And yet in its finest moments, that clumsy title couldn't be more appropriate. This is a game that skilfully blends the safe with the courageous in an alchemical fusion of old and new, somehow brave and default all at once.

8



RIGHT While *Bravely Default* passes the Bechdel test, there's a troubling undercurrent of misogyny. In some cases, it gives you motivation to destroy your enemies, though Ringabel's frequent suggestive comments towards both Edea and Agnès are harder to tolerate



LEFT The Abilink feature allows you to connect to friends locally or online, boosting your pool of skills by aligning your characters with theirs. Any registered friends – or strangers you've StreetPassed – can be summoned in battle to deliver a single blow. Its power increases each time they're called upon





ABOVE *Bravely Default* demands many hours to finish, but it's intelligently streamlined, too. You can instantly optimise loadouts, battles can be sped up at the touch of a button, and you can adjust the encounter rate as well. LEFT It often pays to take out weaker enemies quickly: you'll earn bonus experience for winning in a single turn, and extra job points should you do so unscathed. Take out all enemies in a single attack, meanwhile, and you'll get the sweeper bonus, significantly swelling your cash reward

Resogun

Publisher SCE
Developer Housemarque
Format PS4
Release Out now

Background scenery in side-scrolling games tends to exist simply to establish a mood. Your success in gameplay terms rarely depends on how closely you survey the horizon. In *Resogun*, however, your hopes of saving the last remnants of humanity – and your leaderboard self-respect – depends on it.

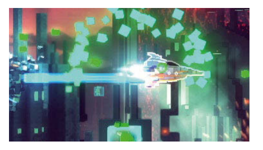
Since the levels of Housemarque's 2D shoot 'em up are laid out like carousels that rotate as you fly left and right, its designers are able to tease you with time-sensitive objectives that can be observed playing out on distant portions of the ring. For instance, prison-colony holding pods that contain humans to save can only be unlocked by killing a special glowing wave of alien Sentients within a limited window of time. *Resogun*'s gameplay is sublimely frantic, proving that you hardly need to slap a digital countdown clock on the screen to communicate urgency to players.

You're meant to feel as tense as an ambulance driver whose dispatcher can't wait for you to finish one drop-off before summoning you to a life-or-death emergency somewhere else. But instead of having to weave around the aerial traffic jams slowing your progress, you're invited to pulverise them with lasers, heat-seeking missiles, nukes and an Overdrive cannon that looks like you're channelling every volt of electricity around you into a focused death ray. It's gorgeous; *Resogun* draws on its host hardware's graphical capabilities to make you feel like the most powerful entity in the room.

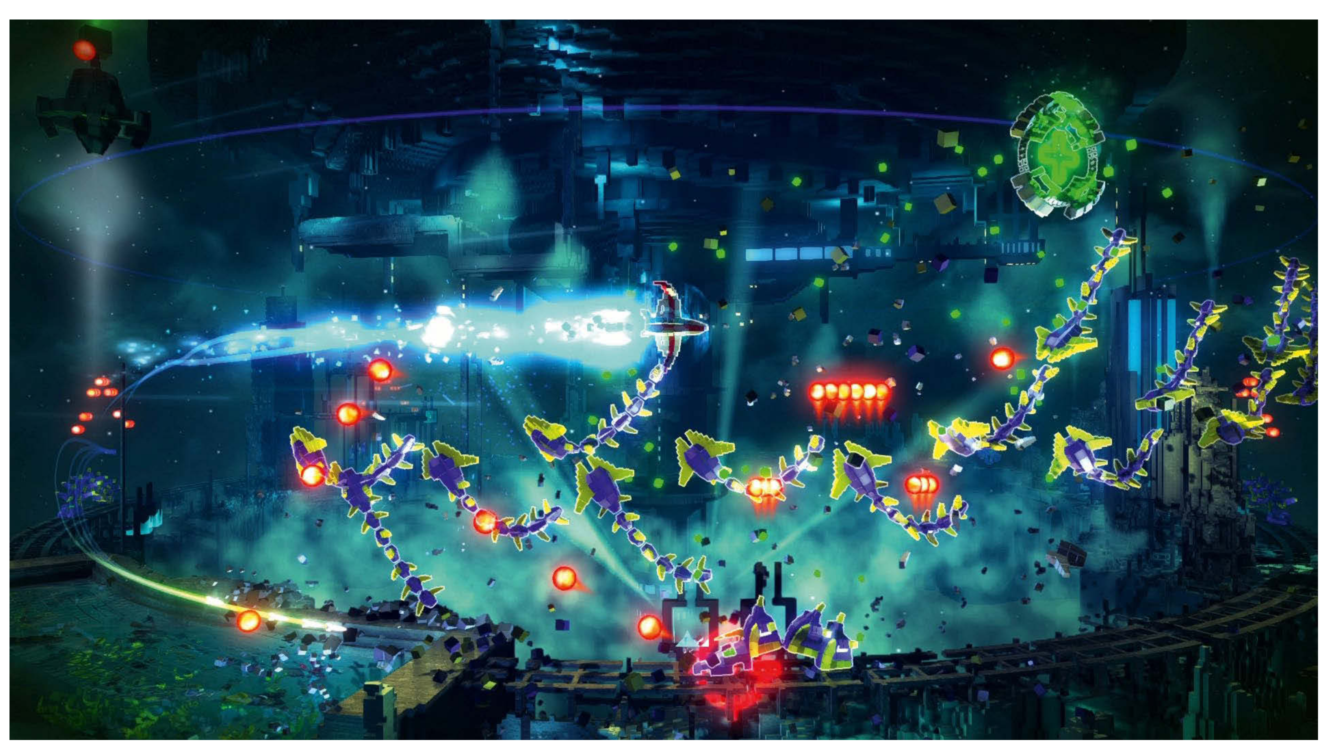
Speaking of your arsenal, rescuing humans is hardly an act of charity; scooping them off the ground and depositing them safely in one of two receptacles along the ceiling provides a random bonus to either your score, shields, or life count, in addition to momentarily supercharging the number of missiles swarming off your regular weapon fire. If you're simply focusing on killing the next enemy careening toward you, sacrificing humans via careless play, those lost rewards will tilt the odds against you, especially in the harder modes.

Despite the modest expectations players might have for a downloadable arcade title, even one on PS4, Housemarque never wants you to forget that *Resogun* is running on new tech. So in addition to the rush of fiery explosions and forks of electrical current, its designers have composed the entire world from thousands of tiny voxels that tumble and ricochet off one another with realistic collision models. Everything you destroy erupts into torrents of cubes. Admittedly, voxels serve an aesthetic purpose and don't impact gameplay directly, but Housemarque's conjured something we've never seen before. Surely that's the baseline promise we expect to see honoured in any next-gen game.


8



ULTIMATE COMBO
The imperative of reaching *Resogun*'s objectives before the window of opportunity closes sometimes means hammering the boost button and cutting a straight line to where you need to be. In other games it would be as simple as that, but Housemarque's boost adds a dash of strategic complexity. Holding L1 rapidly depletes your meter, but you can keep going by using your temporary invulnerability to chain collisions with enemies.



These weaving snake-like Sentients require you to focus firepower on their yellow noses in order to bring them down, which forces you to think tactically about your positioning in among all the crisscrossing fireballs

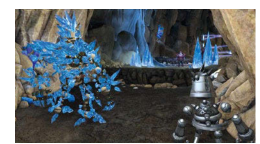
Knack

Publisher SCE
Developer In-house (Japan Studio)
Format PS4
Release Out now

Sony's extensive collection of production studios has never succeeded in creating a family-friendly action game to stand alongside the finest *Mario* adventures, but that hasn't stopped them trying. And that makes *Knack*'s failings all the more galling. This is a game with none of the *Ratchet & Clank* series' grinning humour or satisfyingly experimental weaponry, nor the bright characterisation or kinetic appeal of the best *Jak And Daxter* titles. It wants desperately to be a joyous romp but over its 49 levels, dragged out across 13 chapters, turns out to be a plodding slog.

Mostly, this is down to its combat, which is weighted so heavily over the only other key element – jumping around the place – that the flimsy, unengaging platform-based sections might as well not exist. Enter an area, identify your opponents, exploit the same simple patterns you've used during your 50 prior meetings with these types, and run along past some pleasantly rendered but uneventful scenery to begin the process anew. At its heart, it's the same sort of action that powers the *Skylanders* series, but it lacks the range of shiny collectibles, the charisma and, obviously, the variety of characters and physical toy counterparts of Activision's child-entrancing powerhouse.

If you're looking for genre staples, *Knack* has them coming out of its ears, from its goblin enemies to its stage settings, which take you through forests, mines and a factory as well as other, even less exciting, locales



A PROBLEM SHARED
Presentation and story aside, you can tell *Knack* is aimed at a family audience through its drop-in/out co-op, which allows a second player to join at any time and control a metallic ally named Robo Knack, capable of standard combat (defeating enemies sees it grow in size) and even replenishing the lead character's health. Given the proliferation of tricky encounters throughout the game, the system lends itself well to parents keen to help younger players grind through the action to the bitter end.

It doesn't help that *Knack*'s pacing veers about so haphazardly. The lead character's ability to change in size and makeup depending on what can be absorbed around you means that one moment you're puny and vulnerable and the next you're a brutal mass capable of destroying a tank with a snappy flurry of punches. But then the game contrives to strip you of your power, and the sense of progression is crushed immediately.

In your character's basic state, *Knack* is at its most frustrating, a crowd of enemies capable of wiping the floor with your weedy body in an instant, necessitating restarts from checkpoints that are doled out at a miserly rate. For a game ostensibly aimed at younger players, going up against titles such as *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*, *Knack* can't help feeling like something of an antique.

The game also fails as a high-profile PS4 launch title in terms of what it's putting onscreen. The particle effects serve their purpose, but everything from the vapid story sequences to the hackneyed goblin foes feels blandly feeble. A chapter setting entitled The Barren Wastes? Yes, you think, no need to ram it home.

About halfway through the game you encounter an area strewn with a dozen or so crates, so naturally you smash them all open. Just one box reveals anything of value. It's an effort/reward ratio that feels entirely out of kilter for a game of this style, and one that reasonably sums up *Knack* as a whole.

3



Crimson Dragon

Crimson Dragon's story is classic childhood wish fulfilment. Boy discovers the disease that wiped out his family has left him able to communicate with dragons. Boy gets recruited for genocidal missions to eradicate the fauna of the planet his people colonised. Of course, there's more nuance than that, but to saddle a beautiful game with such a token storyline feels needless, especially when it would have been enough to say, "Welcome to the Fantasy Zone! Get ready!"

You begin *Crimson Dragon* with a choice of fire or chaos dragon, and a shop selling a handful of others. Attacks vary across the types, but the multiple lock-on of *Panzer Dragoon* and *Rez* is present, along with a steady pulsing stream of slow homing attacks. As you unlock more dragons, and earn moves from in-level drops, you'll expand your range of attacks, including a huge reticle that fills a ninth of the screen, picking off enemies and letting you focus on avoiding attacks.

That's a relief, because the incoming missiles are so numerous, and your dragon so large, that avoiding damage often feels fortunate rather than elegant. While the game's mostly on rails, the left stick moves you around the screen, and bullets tend to track you on the harder levels. Committing to a bumper button barrel roll is one option, but you'll find yourself using the left stick to constantly circle the screen. Meanwhile, the reticle aim is generous, but it needs to be given how preoccupied you are with circling the screen.

Crimson Dragon's appeal lies in replayability rather than variety. You'll miss a group of rare creatures the first time around, and endangered creatures yield better rewards. Learning the patterns also makes the missions more entertaining as cheap-feeling surprises give way to prepared determination. While the game's economy seems aggressively geared towards microtransactions (see 'Crimson cash-in'), Gems, one of the game's two currencies, become easier to win when you return to a level with a more evolved beast. The other, Credits, are more generously doled out through normal play, and you'll need plenty to unlock the later, harder stages.

Crimson Dragon is at its most absorbing when it's not hard. There's a sense of satisfying caretaking to easier levels, and the constant stream of instant rewards for playing well is more gratifying than it should be. It's during its harder moments that *Crimson Dragon* pushes you away. A combination of heavy handling and poor communication make you feel hoodwinked rather than outmatched, and the ability to buy continues with Gems you've purchased with real money sullies the challenge. It's a good job that the Zen gardens of those easier levels are always there to return to.

5

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Grounding, Inc
Format Xbox One
Release Out now



CRIMSON CASH-IN

The most poisonous thing about *Crimson Dragon* is the inclusion of a dual currency system lifted from the F2P scene. Gems are the premium variety, and can be earned through difficult challenges during missions, or purchased in the Microsoft Store. Around $10 nets you a bundle of 45 Gems, which can be swapped for 22.5 mid-level continues, or three 'unmissable' item packs. But the ability to buy your way to the end of a particularly tough level makes difficulty spikes a source of mistrust and suspicion.



As attractive as the odd screenshot can make *Crimson Dragon* look, it's hardly a showcase for the power of Microsoft's hardware. The game's origins as an Xbox 360 project should shoulder some of the blame

LocoCycle

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Twisted Pixel Games
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

Just a few miles into the ordeal that sees Pablo, *LocoCycle*'s unfortunate sidekick, dragged along behind a sentient motorcycle, he cries out, "When will this suffering end?" We empathise. *LocoCycle*'s premise is a delirious one: an anthropomorphic bike, IRIS – capable of air combos and wielding her trapped mechanic as a melee weapon – is on the run from her military creators. Despite such creative abandon, Twisted Pixel has stifled the setup's fun to make one of the most miserable games in recent memory.

The action takes place across five stages, each divided into three parts, bookended by a prologue and a final boss fight. In each, you tear along a snaking highway, avoiding civilian traffic and destroying the forces sent to prevent your escape. Holding RT initiates a screen-shaking boost, while tapping B fires a gun that's underpowered and difficult to aim. You also have access to *Road Rash*-style sideswiping manoeuvres that do more damage, but are so unlikely to connect that you've little choice but to endure IRIS's military-grade peashooter, which can at least be upgraded.

Things improve somewhat when you engage jetpack-wearing soldiers, one of the handful of enemy types that Twisted Pixel endlessly recycles. Avoid these baddies' lasers while boosting to close the gap and you'll be able to leap into the air like a petrol-guzzling Dante to fight them wheel-to-hand. Occasionally, an enemy attack is highlighted by a red circle, an accompanying audio cue signalling that it can be countered by tapping the boost button in between the endless mashing of X. It's impossible to fall back to the road during these sequences, and at one point we racked up a 110-hit combo without even looking at the screen.

A sprinkling of minigames punctuate the tedious, floaty driving sections, including one where Pablo must repair IRIS before a truck hits the pair of you. Also breaking up the action are frequent QTEs, which can be frustratingly vague in their requirements.

LocoCycle is a baffling litany of decisions that misfire. The bike's handling is horrible, the art style is primitive, and the inclusion of looping FMV backgrounds is an unfunny throwback to the days when developers threw anything at CD-ROMs in a bid to simply fill them up. The abysmally scripted cutscenes perhaps best sum up *LocoCycle*'s wrongheadedness, showcasing the bum notes of its off-colour humour at excruciating length.

It's tempting to believe that Microsoft and Twisted Pixel set out to create some kind of meta-joke here, but the line between a successful and unsuccessful parody can be a fine one. All *LocoCycle* achieves is falling on its face, while no one laughs. **2**



UNCUT SCENES
Twisted Pixel has spent what is presumably a fat stack of cash on a series of overlong live-action sequences that tell *LocoCycle*'s story. The cast includes Six Feet Under actor Freddy Rodríguez, Robert 'T-1000' Patrick and From Dusk Till Dawn's Tom Savini, along with full-scale models of both IRIS and her pursuer, SPIKE. Despite the talent on offer, the director has managed to wrench low-grade performances out of everyone, and everything drags painfully, from lingering shots to loosely paced dialogue.



***LocoCycle* manages to look ugly in every frame, mixing low-res textures and low-poly models with uninspired art direction. The game's physics and AI don't fare much better, either, failing to convey any sense of weight**

create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things kicks off on p106, where we talk to *Skulls Of The Shogun* developer Jake Kazdal about his journey from Nintendo Gameplay Conselor to taking on the roles of director, art director and creative director on his own games. On p108, we head to the curiously quiet Greenbriars' house, the setting for The Fullbright Company's minimalistic exploration game *Gone Home*. On p110, we explore the origins of the Hadoken, videogaming's most iconic battle cry, and learn the reason why down, down-forward, forward and any punch input are so ingrained into the language of videogames some 26 years later. In our Studio Profile on p112, we speak to Finnish mobile developer Supercell about why a two-game company warranted a $1.5 billion investment, and how a large studio can operate like a small one once managers and processes are cleared out of the way. The Making Of... on p116 looks at this year's unlikeliest hit and one of **Edge**'s top ten titles of the year, *Papers, Please*, a game even its developer wasn't certain would sell. Our columnists sign off the issue starting on p120, where Tadhg Kelly grapples with the problem of being misunderstood. Clint Hocking looks again at games attempting to simulate human behaviour on p122, and decides they still don't go far enough. Finally, on p124 James Leach looks back at Lionhead's *The Movies* and an important lesson: that nonessential features can be the ones that delight players most.



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Development news, analysis and reviews



***Street Fighter*'s Hadoken (see p110) and Ryu are instantly associated, but the move's legacy affects every character in the series' extensive roster, even those who cannot cast a fireball themselves**



People

JAKE KAZDAL

The artist behind Rez's visual style on becoming a game designer in his own right

After his time with Sega, Kazdal worked on Steven Spielberg's abortive *LMNO* project at EA. Also at EA during that time were eventual *Skulls Of The Shogun* co-creators Borut Pfeifer and Ben Vance

Perhaps it was inevitable that **Jake Kazdal** would grow up wanting to make games. His father owned a chain of pizza parlours across Seattle throughout the '70s and '80s, each one lined with arcade machines. "For a five-year-old looking up at these monolithic black altars, it was almost too much to handle," the designer recalls. "I had an immediate absolute respect and passion for these games." Kazdal's father would fill a Styrofoam cup with quarters and send his son off to fill a *Pac-Man*, *Asteroids* or *Tempest* cabinet with credits to while away the hours. "It was like having my own arcade in many ways. All those gameplay moments and lessons were etched into my young brain."

If having his own childhood arcade wasn't enough to set him down a career path towards videogames, Kazdal's family home was 15 minutes from Nintendo Of America's offices. At the age of 15, his best friend's sister landed a job there working the phones. She told him about the so-called Gameplay Counselors that Nintendo employed, who would answer callers' game-related questions and provide hints. "You had to be 16 to apply," he says, "so on my birthday I had everything lined up and applied for the job. This was the NES heyday. I played probably three-quarters of all NES games. It was fantastic."

Later on, Kazdal decided to study art to provide him with a formal way into the game industry and enrolled on an animation program at Vancouver Film School in British Columbia. The Monday after he graduated, he started work at Lobotomy Software, a studio set up by three of his former bosses at Nintendo. From there, Kazdal joined Boss Game Studio and worked on N64 title *Twisted Edge Extreme Snowboarding*.

"I videotaped the Winamp player [visualisation plug-in]. That's where the wireframe look for Rez originated"

It was while working at Boss that Kazdal's life took an unexpected turn. One day, a specialist in 3D animation program Maya visited the office to offer some advanced training. "I had spent a semester of college in Kobe, Japan, and had a ton of Japanese *Street Fighter* and *Virtua Fighter* toys on my desk," Kazdal recalls. "This guy, Kenneth Ibrahim, immediately asked me if I had been to Japan. Out of nowhere, I said, 'Yes, and it's my dream to work at Sega someday.' Kenneth told me that he used to work at Sega in Tokyo. He asked if I knew who **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** was."

Kazdal knew all about Mizuguchi, the creator of *Sega Rally*, having recently read a profile in **Edge** featuring the designer. Ibrahim explained that Mizuguchi was coming to America soon and invited Kazdal to meet him.

The pair met at E3 in 1998. "I had prepared a demo reel of my paintings, animations and drawings to show him," Kazdal explains. "We went out for drinks and dinner the next day to continue our discussion, and Mizuguchi asked me what my biggest inspirations were. I told him I had seen this crazy psychedelic club music concert scene in the latest Macross movie. It had been drawn by Koji Morimoto, one of the lead animators on the seminal film Akira, who I said Mizuguchi probably hadn't heard of."

Mizuguchi started laughing. Then he replied: "Know him? Koji Morimoto works for me. Would you like to meet him?" And Mizuguchi told Kazdal about a game he was planning that drew upon house music and the clubbing scene. He asked the artist if he would be interested in moving to Japan to work with him at United Game Artists. The game was *Rez*.

"When I told my friends I was moving to Japan, they were incredulous," Kazdal says. "I didn't speak Japanese. But I am a hopeless optimist." Despite his optimism, he realised the gravity of his decision when he arrived in Tokyo: almost nobody spoke English. "The art director, [Yumiko] Miyabe, had watched a load of Star Trek: The Next Generation," he recalls, "and was able to use some Starfleet-esque English to communicate with me."

Kazdal would write down words that were used repeatedly in meetings and later find out their meanings. Within a year, he could converse in Japanese, even if he mostly let his "pen do the talking".

Kazdal worked on the glitter-pop music game *Space Channel 5* before joining the *Rez* team. "The project was phenomenal," he says. "That feeling of absolute challenge; there was no game to look at for inspiration."

The team would go clubbing with Mizuguchi on weekends and dance through the night. Kazdal would carry a pocket Moleskine notebook with him at all times to jot down ideas. One night, he saw a VJ using a Winamp plugin that displayed sound waves moving to the beat. "I asked my best friend, Hideto Yamada, who worked at Namco, if he knew what the software was," he recalls. "He told me he had it at home. That night, we went back to his house and I videotaped the Winamp player. I showed it to Mizuguchi the following Monday. That's where the wireframe look for *Rez* originated."

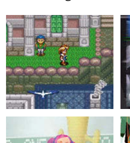
After completing *Rez*, Kazdal worked on a GameCube adventure for a year, a prototype that was never released. Then the news came that Sega planned to incorporate United Game Artists into Sonic Team. As many of his friends at the studio departed, Kazdal also decided to leave in order further his studies in industrial design and concept art. He returned to America to study at the Art Center College Of Design in Pasadena.

Later, while working at Zombie Studios on *Blacklight: Tango Down*, Kazdal began spending his evenings and weekends on a hobby project with a designer he knew called Borut Pfeifer. Kazdal soon decided to go indie and founded what would become 17-Bit in order to work full time on the game. *Skulls Of The Shogun*, released earlier this year for Xbox Live Arcade and PC, was a chance for Kazdal to take back creative control more than anything. "I had worked for many years on large teams, and was tired of the big-budget, full-3D game experience," he says. "I wanted to do something I could largely control with my own two hands, some sort of art that I could realistically do the entire art production myself, as well as try my hand at being a game designer, not just an artist who secretly wanted to be a designer."

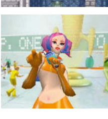
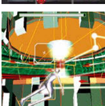
Despite now having a wife and young children, Kazdal's adventurous spirit has not left him. Recently, he has convinced the 17-Bit team to relocate to Japan. The studio settles in Kyoto next year to continue working on *Galak-Z*, a 2D space combat game that Kazdal describes as "a love letter to my childhood and those arcade games I grew up with in my dad's pizza parlours". It's part of a continuing affair with the medium. As Kazdal explains: "This is all I have done with most of my life. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I am a very lucky man." ■

CV

URL www.17-bit.com
Selected Softography *Illusion Of Time/Illusion Of Gaia* (1993), *Spider* (1997), *Twisted Edge Extreme Snowboarding* (1998), *Space Channel 5* (1999), *Rez* (2001), *Skulls Of The Shogun* (2013)








Places

THE GREENBRIARS' HOUSE

Demonstrating the power of building a place, not just a game environment

Sam's room is a microcosm of '90s teen rebellion, with its sticker-covered drawers and riot grrrl cassette tapes fighting against a homelier style of decor. It's a perfect showroom for Fullbright's eye for detail

From *Gone Home*
Developer The Fullbright Company
Origin US
Release 2013

Videogame houses aren't for living in. They're structures to pass through, false walls to hem you in, puzzle chambers and well-dressed mazes, not homes. Can you imagine trying to live in *Resident Evil*'s Spencer Mansion, even without all the slathering hounds and flaking undead? It's not designed for convenience, but to gate your progress. And that's why The Fullbright Company achieved something remarkable in *Gone Home*, building a virtual space that's fit for both a game and a family. Unravelling the history of the Greenbriars relies not on understanding the esoteric logic of videogame spaces, but the far more relatable design of everyday domiciles.

The game also has what may well be the most unobtrusive opening yet conceived. No arbitrary text box telling you what to do pops into your field of view when you take control of Kaitlin Greenbriar as she returns to Arbor Hill after a year abroad. Kaitlin never irritatingly mutters to herself just to clue you in on what you should be doing, either. But the moment you discover Samantha's note asking you not to look through the house or try to find her evokes a natural sibling reaction: I will do precisely what my little sister has asked me not to. The front door, however, is locked. Yet already Fullbright has silently asked you to think like a family member, and gaining entry into the home requires deduction along those lines. The key isn't hidden under the mat, in the mailbox or in plain sight, but it is under the goofy-looking Christmas duck in the corner cupboard with the other holiday decorations. The way it's highlighted suggests it's been like that all your life.

Walking into the foyer drives home the complicated, conflicting feelings that anyone in Kaitlin's situation might feel. The spare key may have been where your parents traditionally leave it, but the house itself is unknown territory. Your folks and Sam have been here for months, though – just enough time to fill up the place with junk and make it sufficiently homely to feel unsettling in its emptiness. No one's home, but there's your old athletics trophy sitting on the shelf. *Gone Home* bottles the creepiness of walking through a familiar place in unfamiliar circumstances, like walking through your school after hours with all the lights turned off.

That's why *Gone Home* is in part a work of horror. There's nothing to be scared of, save your sister's safety, and even her note speaks more to a teenage tantrum than actual danger. Just because there's nothing to fear doesn't mean each step in this half-known domesticity isn't pulse quickening. Fullbright knows it's creeping you out, too, and fills the Greenbriars' house with misleading portents to dread. There's the smears of red in the bathtub, the locked attic door bathed in red light, and the secret corridor to the basement with a bare light bulb lurking in the shadow just beyond the safe illumination of your parents' room.



Despite a number of apparently sinister scenes, *Gone Home* is not a horror story per se. But its atmosphere can make you jump

> Gone Home bottles the creepiness of walking through a familiar place in unfamiliar circumstances

The house carefully draws you forward despite making you afraid, pulling any number of tricks to make you ignore your instincts. You know the young couple in a slasher flick shouldn't open that door, but when you see the light on in a back room of the house's west first floor, how can you resist investigating? Of course, no one is there, but then you're close enough to the living room to hear that the television is on. Perhaps someone's asleep on the couch, then? Well, no, not physically. But the imprints of your family's lives fill up each room as you enter it.

Gone Home leaves just enough in your peripheral vision to make you examine each and every thing you can pick up. The detritus of your father's writing career litters not just his office, but is found in the scraps of paper and notes inside every paperback, the TV Guide and innumerable bits of everyday flotsam lying around. Crippling marital boredom and the excitement of career success and infatuation fill your mother's day planner and correspondence with her friend. These puzzle pieces, which allow you to reconstruct the events of the past year, are occasionally left in plain sight, but they're more often tucked away under something eye-catching, nostalgic or both, such as old VHS tapes.

While Kaitlin is reconnecting with her home life, she's also learning about her sister's harrowing coming of age. The narrated journal entries that play after Kaitlin finds key possessions seem out of place with the game's naturalistic flow at first. It's strange to hear a disembodied voice coming out of thin air rather than a cassette-driven answering machine or the speakers of a CRT television in the Greenbriars' house. Those journal entries are revealed to be a remarkable piece of game design in *Gone Home*'s final moments, though. Beneath the trappings and spirit of home infused in every inch of Fullbright's debut is a deeply traditional game structure. With each progression milestone, Kaitlin is treated with a new journal entry. And with each journal entry discovered, she comes closer to completing her ascent through the house to that hauntingly locked attic.

A common argument goes that videogame houses don't need to be homes. *Gone Home*'s domestic disarray is the defiant counter-argument to that theory. It's a place where every inch of environment serves both the game and a real-world purpose. Perhaps that's why *Gone Home*'s ostensibly mundane setting proves such a powerful draw, and forms the perfect wrapper for a love story dressed in horror clothing. ■



Things

HADOKEN

This mashup of sci-fi and martial arts is far more than a signature move

The Hadoken projectile of series poster boy Ryu is the most iconic, its colour palette all pale blues and whites, but there are various colour variations emitted from other fighters, from burning reds to mystical purples

From *Street Fighter*
Developer Capcom/Dimps
Origin Japan
First release 1987

Earlier this year, 26 years after *Street Fighter*'s 1987 debut, a photographic meme spread across Japan. The first participant in the picture would be seen leaning forward in a deep lunge, the leading leg bent heavily, the trailing leg extended behind their torso, straight and purposeful. Their head would be slightly lowered, and the subject's hands would be angled with fingers cupped, ready to catch (or, more accurately, deliver) a sizeable ball. The second participant, positioned a few feet from the first, would leap into the air at the very moment the photograph was taken, perhaps cradling their stomach as if having received a terrible blow. The caption would read: "Hadoken!"

The scene is familiar to any fighting game player, for the Hadoken, *Street Fighter*'s signature projectile ball of energy, went on to cut a swathe of influence through almost every fighting game that followed in its wake. The special move has the air of Eastern mysticism about it. The word itself is a Japanese coinage translated as "wave motion fist" or "surge fist" and, in the game's fiction, is achieved by the fighter concentrating his or her 'chi' into a ball of tight energy in the hands, which can then be hurled at their opponent.

But in truth, *Street Fighter* creator Takashi Nishiyama, now president of Dimps (the contractor that created *Street Fighter IV*), was influenced by science fiction rather than martial arts when he designed the move. While Nishiyama exaggerated real-life martial arts to create the blazing uppercut known as a Shoryuken and the helicopter blade spin-kick known as Tatsumaki Senpukyaku, the Hadoken was lifted from the anime Space Battleship Yamato. The eponymous battleship has a laser missile weapon called Hadouho, which collects energy before blasting it through space towards the enemy. Nishiyama took the concept, shrunk it to human proportions and turned it into a projectile attack that could be used by a character to keep their enemy at a distance in both the original *Street Fighter* and SNK's *Fatal Fury*.

The Hadoken, far from being a mere stock move available to all characters, was skilfully weaved into the game's narrative. Only certain fighters, those who study the Shotokan style of karate, can deploy the move. Moreover, the size, colour, texture and properties of a character's Hadoken communicate something about them. Ryu, the lead in *Street Fighter*'s ensemble cast, has a devastating example, one that travels quickly through the air. With a different joystick input, the ball can take on fiery properties, revealing the rage that lurks underneath Ryu's calm exterior.



Ryu's Hadoken can be sent at one of three speeds – slow, medium and fast – depending on the strength of the attack input used

Ken – Ryu's speedier, more flighty and flippant best friend – is a full-contact fighter whose style is built on his Shoryuken Dragon Punch at the expense of his slower, weaker Hadoken. Energy balls from the hand of Akuma, the pair's devilish nemesis, shimmer with purplish evil and can be deployed in the air, demonstrating his interest in and study of Satsui No Hado, a dark form of martial energy. The ambitious Sakura, who learned the Hado style simply by mimicking Ryu, has a weak, imperfect energy ball that travels just a few metres before it expires. And Dan, the series' comically ineffectual combatant, cannot even make his Hadoken leave the palm of his hand. In this way, the Hadoken bespeaks its creator, giving us shorthand insight into their psyche, yielding different styles and tactics.

> The Hadoken bespeaks its creator, giving us insight into their psyche, yielding different styles

In play, the Hadoken is an essential tool in many characters' arsenals. It is used to control the horizontal field of play, to keep an opponent exactly where you want them. Timing mistakes in unleashing one can be grimly punished, however, since a Hadoken leaves its caster vulnerable for a few frames after it's thrown. Fire a Hadoken from a suboptimal distance, or lapse into a predictable pattern, and your foe can hurdle the projectile and land a jumping attack, which is potentially the start of a devastating combo. Opponents who don't have an energy ball attack of their own are often given means of getting around them. Hulking US boxer Balrog, for instance, can pass straight through projectiles with his Turn Punch.

The balance of risk and reward is wonderfully explicit in the Hadoken and there are few tools in the *Street Fighter* arsenal better suited to teaching a player about the importance of controlling the space between you and your foe. There is a moral here: in offense there is always danger and even if you bring a fireball to a fist fight, you're not guaranteed victory.

Twenty-six years on and, as Japan's meme attests, the Hadoken is one of gaming's most enduringly recognisable poses. In its outline we perceive power, training and control, but also the threat of risk. There is, however, another way in which the move has entered our language: it has become part of our muscle memory. Down, down-forward, forward + punch: the controller input was designed by Nishiyama to mimic the onscreen animation of the move, as if grounding oneself with the downward stick motion, then lifting the hands upwards and towards your opponent. It is, alongside Mario's ground pound and Sonic's revving spin, one of the earliest and most enduring input sequences, one never forgotten once learned. The Hadoken may be science fiction, but in this way it has become part of us, something that can be summoned from the hands with concentration – just so long as they are resting on an arcade stick. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Supercell

Why $1.5 billion will change nothing for Finland's newest mobile success story

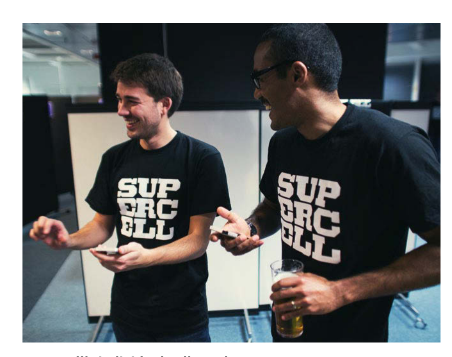
1 *Clash Of Clans'* dragons have been subtly redesigned over the past year, and most of its troops have received a level-five variant as the game continues to evolve. 2 *Hay Day's* art, with its bold colours and confused animals, is a big part of its appeal

Much of the top floor of Nokia's old research-and-development building in Helsinki lies unoccupied. It's painted in Supercell colours and outfitted for developers, but waiting for people to bring the place to life. When we visited the studio previously, in February, much of the space was grey and the building was empty, serviced by a bored receptionist responsible for floor after floor of vacant offices. Since then, a new company, Jolla, has moved into a lower floor and Supercell has expanded to fill its own top-floor space after receiving $1.5 billion of investment from Japanese telecom company SoftBank in exchange for a 51 per cent stake in the company. Now expansion is just the beginning of Supercell's plans.

"More than anything," says CEO **Ilkka Paananen**, "I think this partnership gives us time. What we're trying to do here is going to take lots of time – and now we have this patient shareholder. At some point, a venture capitalist has to be able to sell the shares in order to make a return, but somebody like SoftBank can basically hold the shares forever. One of our dreams would be to create a game company that can last for decades and decades, and something that will really be loved by the players and employees."

On the day of SoftBank's investment, the press likened this dream to some form of 'Finnish Nintendo'. "For me, if I think of Nintendo, the first thing that comes to mind is I love their games," Paananen says. "I love their brands, their characters, how they've always focused on gameplay, how they've always taken their own route no matter what anybody in the industry thinks. If you mention Nintendo in front of people, you get a smile. If in 30 years I say 'Supercell' and the reaction is similar, then I think we really will have achieved something. I don't even want to compete against them. They are an inspiration. It took Nintendo 100 years to get there, so it's possible it will take us 100 years to get there, and that's why we need someone like SoftBank as a partner – someone who is willing to see us through the next 100 years."

A 100-year mission is a bold ambition for a studio with two games. It's made more than that, but its first title, Facebook MMOG *Gunshine.net*, was abandoned in 2012, and its second, iOS strategy game *Battle Buddies*, never progressed beyond its limited beta release. Today, Supercell is a two-game company and a permanent fixture



Supercell's individual cells gather to compare notes every week, keeping knowledge flowing freely within the studio

atop Apple's highest-grossing app chart. The studio operates two teams to run its 'live' free-to-play mobile games: *Hay Day* and *Clash Of Clans*. The first, an impeccably polished and massively expanded iOS take on *FarmVille*, was uploaded to the App Store on June 21, 2012, and has been continually developed in the months since. The second, a base-building and defence strategy game, went live on August 2 in the same year and has also been updated and maintained throughout the past 16 months.

"If you mention Nintendo, you get a smile. I don't want to compete against them. They are an inspiration"

"The biggest thing with a live game is that it's important to keep the game running, keep the players happy and listen to them a lot more," says **Lassi Leppinen**, a Supercell co-founder and product lead for *Clash Of Clans*. "We try to summarise what is important and what the big audience is really saying about us and to us. If there's something that thousands of players are saying, we listen and improve the game. If it's running, you have players every minute."

As if to prove the point, the entrance to Supercell's studio is home to an interactive world map that shows every game of *Clash Of Clans* and *Hay Day* being played, updated second by second. Clusters of lights appear all over the map, primarily in capital cities, and hour by hour the lights make their way around the globe. At the centre of the studio sits the 20-strong customer support team, nearly all of different nationalities, providing support in each region's native language.

At the opposite end, at the edge of the new expanded space, the 17-person *Hay Day* team currently dwarfs the smaller *Clash Of Clans* unit. "We're in the very last part of the office and it takes forever to walk to the kitchen," says *Hay Day's* product lead **Stephan Demirdjian**, whose team has expanded for the game's Android launch. "For a year, it was the right decision to focus on iOS, because we had a huge backlog of features we wanted to do. We noticed high-level players didn't have enough content any more, so that became a number one priority for us before thinking about other platforms. We basically worked two full months on the fishing feature and the fans loved it. That was the main reason we decided against Android at that point. We're on it now."

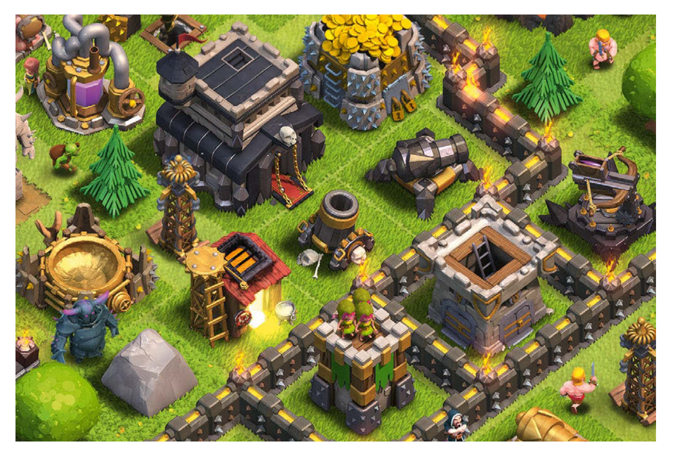
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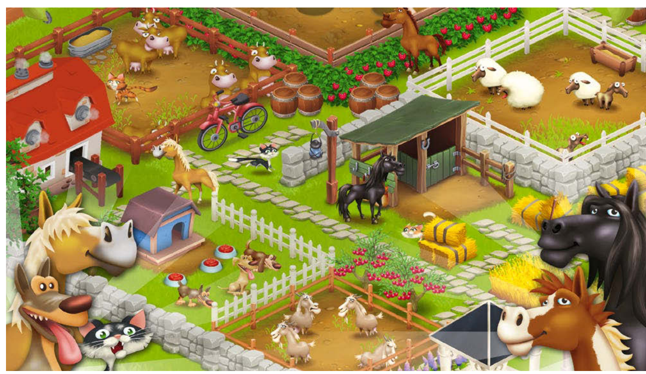
Founded 2010
Employees 130
Key staff Ilkka Paananen (CEO), Mikko Kodisoja, Niko Derome, Lassi Leppinen, Visa Forsten and Petri Styrman (founders)
URL www.supercell.net
Selected softography *Hay Day*, *Clash Of Clans*

But while support for its chart-toppers continues, in 16 months Supercell has published no new games, only porting its iOS hits to Android. The elephant in the primary-coloured room, then, is just how SoftBank values a two-game company at three billion dollars.

"For me, it's weird to talk about the valuation of the company and so on," Paananen says. "When they first approached us, I told them, 'You must understand that we love what we do, and we're just getting started, and we're not going to sell the company to anybody. We want to be in control of this thing…' And the reply that came back was, 'Fantastic, that's exactly what we're looking for.' They wanted to get 51 per cent of the economic rights of the company so they can consolidate our financials to their corporate financials, so that's how they get the financial value. But I feel like what they liked was the specific team and the culture we have here, and the fact that we are here for the long term."

Supercell operates differently to other billion-dollar studios. While the larger live teams work on *Clash Of Clans* and *Hay Day*, four smaller six- to eight-person 'cells' work on other projects and experiments with almost complete autonomy. These teams, Paananen says, sitting at his desk in





With just two games, *Clash Of Clans* and *Hay Day*, Supercell has been reportedly making $2.4m per day, and long ago was considered more valuable than EA's 200-game mobile division. If it continues at this rate, Supercell could return SoftBank's investment within just a few years

the centre of the open-plan space, are in charge of the company's development. If a cell decides to abandon its project, even the CEO can't stop it.

"Some resources are shared – for example, the audio," Paananen explains. "But apart from that, we tried to make the cells self-contained, almost like companies inside a bigger company. That's where the name Supercell comes from. It's a lot more fun to work in a team that is less than ten people – you don't need managers, you don't need processes because there are so few people, and the teams manage themselves. We now have two great benchmarks internally: *Hay Day* and *Clash*. People look up to them and they set a nice standard on how quickly people should move when making a game. It's really important to get games to the beta stage as quickly as possible. At that point, the power shifts from the game team to the players. From that point onward, the only thing we care about is what the players think.

"We look at metrics for engagement and retention. How many times players play the game per day. How many people came back after the first day, after the third day? Do people love the game? We have a certain type of threshold that the game must reach during the beta." If the game reaches that point, it's prepped for global release; if it fails, the team cancels the project and moves on to the next one. "It's a very simple process," Paananen says. "But at Supercell, only two entities have control – the game teams and the players. Nobody else has it."

Abandoned projects, of which there are several, are a source of education for the other cells and each will share their successes and failures with the rest of the studio. "One of the risks, of course, in that type of organisation model is that these cells will turn into these silos where nothing is shared and there's intense competition within them," Paananen says. "But we try to share as much as we can. We gather together as a company and we hold a little bit of a party around the decision to kill a game. The team gets up on the stage, they say what they tried to do, what worked and what didn't work, [and] what they learned. That actually happens quite often. We work on something for two or three months and then it doesn't work, they kill it and move on to the next thing. We give bottles of champagne to the team to show how much we appreciate what comes out of it."

> "We get together as a company and hold a little bit of a party around a team's decision to kill a game"

Above all, Supercell is a Finnish company with all the cultural trappings to match. The old Nokia building Supercell calls home has two saunas, while the company's big screen faces the studio's cloakroom, where shoes are left before a day's work. Talk to any developer in Helsinki and they'll tell stories about friends from other studios or of notes shared between firms. While only half of Supercell's 130-strong team are from the country, the studio culture is resolutely Finnish.

"Nobody thinks anybody is a competitor here in Finland – more of a friend or a colleague," Paananen says. "It's definitely one of the strengths of the ecosystem here. I think throughout history, Finns have always been at their best when everybody is in it together. There's this saying in Finnish: as the situation gets tougher and tougher, you get closer together. That's just how it is."

Supercell is at the centre of Finland's booming development industry, which has grown from 1,100 employees and €105 million in revenues in 2010 to 2,200 employees and €800 million in 2013. The nation's expertise comes from one of the best education systems in the world, a culture based on working together, a proactive chapter of the IGDA and the collapse of Nokia. For a decade or more, tech-savvy graduates could count on a career with the nation's cellphone manufacturer, but now those same graduates have turned to development of mobile games, and the industry is enjoying apparently unstoppable growth across the country. But free-to-play is a precarious arena in which developers are still finding their feet. Former giant Zynga has suffered catastrophic losses following a campaign of investment and expansion, but Paananen and his investors at SoftBank are confident in Supercell's ongoing success.

"*Clash Of Clans* was the first western game to make it to the top five grossing in Japan and we've been there ever since. I think we're the only two western games in the top ten, probably in the top 20. That probably got their attention. [SoftBank] contacted us, and we said we're not looking to sell the company, and they said they're not looking to buy a controlling interest, they just want the [share of Supercell] so they can consolidate the financials, but we could do whatever we want with the company.

"They said, 'You guys run the business; you're in control.' I think the proof is that there's 1,300 companies under SoftBank's umbrella, so they can't manage all those companies. How would they find the time? I think it's kind of like a match made in heaven. SoftBank has a 30-year plan and a 300-year mission. We've got this great longterm partnership that feels like it will work for decades to come. We'll have really bad quarters, they're going to come, maybe the next one or in ten years, [but] that's the nature of the business. You just need to have somebody you can work for in the long term, who is thinking about the next ten years. What changes after this investment? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"I think it's very important to remain small and agile. If you become this bureaucratic big company, you're going to lose because you can't operate in this market unless you move very quickly. Essentially, we are competing against the smallest guys on the planet. It's such a competitive industry and there are hundreds of new games coming to the App Store every week. If you want to remain successful, you have to be humble and work extremely hard. The minute you lose the focus, the minute you lose your sight on the ball, then you're dead." ■



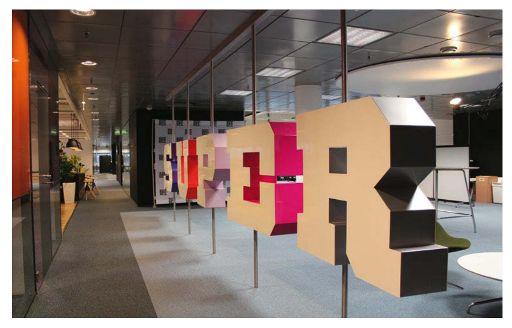
Ilkka Paananen
Founder and CEO

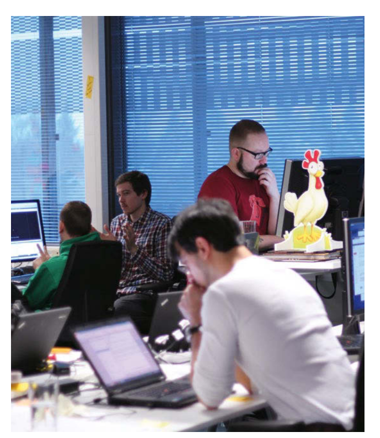
F2P is a tricky space. Few developers have found a model that sticks, so how does Supercell go about pitching its model just right?
It is tricky. I'll tell you a secret: during the *Clash Of Clans* beta, our metrics platform didn't work, so we went in completely blind. We only had the basic metrics like daily active users, but we had zero A/B testing. Nothing.

So it was all on faith in the end?
Yeah, and gut feeling. The players need to want to pay; you can't force them – that's completely the wrong mindset. F2P is all about: 'Here's a great game, now let's give these people the right to play it for free.' You can't cheat people. Our players are super smart. We had these leading clans visit the office and they know more about the game than you do. If there's something to gain by paying, they'll abandon the game because it's not fun any more. You lose when you cheat people.

***Clash Of Clans* has been described as mid-core, but it sounds hardcore if a clan can come in and teach you things about it.**
I don't like this classification of casual, mid-core, hardcore. *Hay Day*, most people would call a casual game, but we have millions of active players who play on average nine times a day. Active players play up to 30 times a day. Some of them spend tens of dollars every month, and they play for 18 months. These people have invested tens of thousands of hours in the game, so what's casual about that? They are extremely passionate about it. I don't know where this categorisation comes from, even though I use it myself. I know what people mean, but I don't think it's very applicable for a lot of gaming.

You've been involved in Finland's development scene for a while. Was it a tough transition to become a hands-off CEO?
Yes and no. I'm passionate about games, and I love to spend time with them myself. As a user, I have opinions – everybody has. But over time, I've learned to see the value in these creative geniuses, and I've learned to stay out of the way. I've noticed the best things happen when I'm not involved – they can work on their own, and organisation moves much quicker. I think my biggest strength is that I made a lot of mistakes. I've been one of those guys who created bureaucratic processes, but in a creative industry, processes are death. I think that's a natural reaction of a CEO: if there's a complex environment, a good CEO wants to get that in control with layers of management, and then you feel good about yourself because you have a chart and it's very defined who is responsible for what. You can go to a board of directors and show them how good you are. But the truth is nobody is in control in a business like games. It's impossible to predict a hit game. At some point, I realised that's completely the wrong way to operate. Our approach is to reduce processes. We deal with complexity by hiring better people and giving those people more control.





Supercell has built an arts and crafts area in its renovated space, but in the absence of employees to fill it, an enterprising soul has turned it into a bar

THE MAKING OF…

Papers, Please

How Lucas Pope left behind an oppressive state of fear and forged a passport to indie self-sufficiency

Of the 27,000 submitted names for migrants, many were too obscene to be used in the game. Pope says the best of the joke names was Schitz Popinoff

Format PC
Publisher/developer Lucas Pope
Origin US/Japan
Release 2013

Lucas Pope had a problem. For the better part of a year, the full-time indie developer had been living off his savings and working by himself on a videogame that he wasn't sure would make its money back when it was done. He liked the game, though, and thought it was fun, so what was the concern? "Well," he says, "it's a game about checking passports."

Document inspection and border control, to be precise: Pope was making a game about the tough decisions inherent in being a border guard. His game was set in a fictional Communist nation, and cast the player as a citizen whose job it is to validate identity documents and observe procedure. While Pope was confident that he was making a good game, he worried that others would write it off after hearing its concept. "It sounds so weird and stupid," he admits.

Those fears were unfounded. "*Papers, Please* is by far the most popular game I've ever done," Pope tells us, having watched sales of his game far outpace his expectations. Its success has reached the point now where it can support Pope and his family. Perversely, the tough-to-explain concept that concerned its creator may have spurred on sales. "It's really hard to describe the game and make it sound fun, which I guess ended up being in its favour. It would make me curious, at least. Somebody tries to explain the game, but it sounds so weird and stupid… that you kind of at least have to take a look to see what it's like."

Before *Papers, Please*, players were most likely to know Pope's work through either his programming contributions to the *Uncharted* series, even if they might not recognise his name in the credits, or iOS game *Helsing's Fire*. Pope's tenure at Naughty Dog stands out as an anomaly on his CV, which otherwise consists of small, independent games, usually made with a few friends or his wife, Keiko, who is also a programmer. Pope left Naughty Dog in 2010 and moved to Saitama, Japan, to be closer to Keiko's family. From Japan, the two made *Helsing's Fire* and a video editing app for iPhone, and then temporarily relocated to Singapore to work on a friend's game.

Pope's travels around Southeast Asia and occasional returns to his homeland, the United States, resulted in a marked increase in the amount of time he spent standing before immigration officers, glancing back and forth between his passport and their computer. The developer found the job fascinating. "Those guys are checked out pretty much the whole time," he explains. "They have a specific thing they're doing and they're just doing it over and over again."

The motions of that job stayed with Pope for a while, having engaged his interest in real-life activities and routines that can translate into gameplay. The designer tends to divide up his ideas for mechanics and story at the beginning of making a game, then allows them to cross-pollinate. But while the routines of checking documents appealed, Pope needed a story catalyst before he decided to turn them into a game. "At that point, I didn't even think I was going to make a game about it. It wasn't until… I think I watched Bourne, or maybe Argo, and I could see that there [was] more potential here than just the mechanic itself. You could mix a good story on top of those core mechanics."

The story *Papers, Please* tells is almost the inverse of Argo's, which details a CIA exfiltration expert's mission to smuggle wanted Americans out of Tehran by getting them to pass as a film crew to subvert a border control check. Pope thought it would be interesting to take that scenario and cast players in the role of the immigration officer instead, and build a game around inspecting as many applicants' documents as possible, cross-referencing passports, ID cards, entry tickets, work passes, diplomatic visas and vaccination records.

"It's really hard to describe the game and make it sound fun, which I guess ended up being in its favour"

Papers, Please would be what Pope calls a 'dystopian document thriller', in which the goal is to bring glory to the totalitarian, 1982 Eastern Bloc-ish state of Arstotzka by outwitting the Ben Afflecks of the world.

Pope began working on *Papers, Please* in late 2012. Backed by his savings from his time at Naughty Dog, he expected to spend a few weeks bringing the project to completion, after which he could move on to something more commercially viable. He also decided to maintain a public log of the game's development on the TIGSource forums, an online community for indie developers.

TIGSource took to *Papers, Please* readily, praising the game's concept, humour and pixel art, which its members persuaded Pope to keep when he considered switching to a smoother, higher-resolution look. The public beta of the game was received well, too, and yet when Pope submitted the game to Steam Greenlight, he wasn't optimistic. Through Greenlight, Steam users can vote a game into getting a distribution deal on the Steam service – or vote against it, as the case may be. Pope, still relatively unknown, thought: 'This is a popularity contest; this isn't going to work well for me.'

Pope isn't used to winning popularity contests for his game design work, even after the praise lavished on 2011 IGF favourite *Helsing's Fire*. "I'm used to, like, my mom: 'Oh, you made a nice little videogame. That's great!' I don't even go into details with most people. I figure that nobody's interested."

Pope had already prepared to be knocked back by the Greenlight voters, and expected to campaign for *Papers, Please* at PAX and other events before trying again. Then the Steam community voted through *Papers, Please* in a matter of days. "Somehow, really popular YouTube players found it and it took off from there. It went through really fast. Don't ask me any objective stuff about Greenlight. I did really well on it – better than I expected. I can't say anything bad about it, basically. I was apprehensive before, but I got really lucky." Pope's Greenlight experience was still a popularity contest, but it suddenly became a popularity contest that he could win.

A fandom was building around *Papers, Please* – the kind that would send Pope pictures of themselves in *Papers, Please* cosplay, or say "Glory to Arstotzka!" in the game's honour. (Pope still isn't sure how he feels about having created fans of a fascist state.) "When people connect with the game, it's not really the mechanics. People [like the] characters, or the events that have you make tough decisions. You know, I wrote it, but I only get something from the randomised, procedural gameplay."

To populate his randomly generated world of hopeful entrants to Arstotzka, Pope invited the public to submit their own names for inclusion in the game. The response was overwhelming – he ended up with almost 30,000 unique names – but only half the ones he received were usable. Many that weren't belonged to anime and webcomic characters. Or they were Czech, Finnish or Polish names whose English translations are unprintable. Pope made it clear he didn't want joke names in his game, even as fans argued that they were funny and wanted them in.

As *Papers, Please*'s profile increased, the feedback from the TIGSource forums started to make less and less sense. How about a *Hotline Miami* sequence where you make your character walk to work in the morning, or redesigning

Papers, Please as a Facebook game where you can approve or deny your own friends?

"I got to this point where I realised everyone has their own idea of what this game is," Pope reflects. "At the beginning, [I thought], 'OK, this feedback is great; I really want to hear what people want.' But a few of the suggestions were completely left-field for what I was thinking. You reach this point where you're like, 'Whose game am I making here? Is it the one I'm thinking about, or is it the one other people are thinking about?'"

In Pope's mind, the game he was making had shifted from an entertaining mechanical diversion to a mechanical diversion that could also convey real meaning. In assigning players the role of the harassed Arstotzka inspector, the game was able to elicit empathy for a cog in the machine, a man bound by the strict-yet-changing immigration policy of a corrupt and totalitarian state. In media coverage, Pope noticed that *Papers, Please* was being referred to as an 'empathy game', earning comparisons to the bleak retail simulator *Cart Life*.

"That was my intention – to show how hard it is to be that guy, you know? A lot of that came from just my world view, which is that any polarising issue has got legitimate stances on either side of it," he says. "[The empathy angle] rose up from the way the story developed, and how I could see the mechanics working with the story. I wanted to add a search scanner, so you can see the person naked. That brings up the issue of, like, 'Why would I want to see this person naked? This is violating their rights.' And so [I had to get to a place where], 'OK, there's a reason for this; it's because there's a suicide bomber. The narrative element that introduces this mechanic is a suicide bomber.' So you kind of see both sides of why it is you need this thing, but also the suicide bombers are really rare and you don't really know a lot about their motivations. You feel a little bit skeezy scanning everybody from this one place. I wanted that to happen, too."

For all his uncompromising vision and unexpected support, the final fortnight of making *Papers, Please* "nearly killed" Pope. "The thing that I didn't really expect is that you have to do a lot of shit that's not making the game. At a certain point, you stop being a guy who programs and designs cool stuff, and you start marketing, or making the webpage, or sending out review codes, or signing contracts for the distribution.

"On top of that, you need to set up store pages; put quotes up; you need images, screenshots; you need to design a webpage… and all of this is stuff that you should have a team of guys for, or be doing throughout development. But for me, all of that stuff got packed into the last two weeks before I shipped. It wasn't until three days before the game was released that I actually finished it, and sent the build to everybody to put it on their servers."

But Pope admits that the pressure to get the game out without delay came as much from within. "I had created a trailer that said, 'Coming summer 2013.' Or 1983, even. Clever. It was getting to be the end of summer, and maybe it wasn't there, but I assumed there was a lot of pressure on me to get the game out as soon as possible. I even got a tweet from some guy calling me a liar. It's stupid stuff that shouldn't affect me, but I was like: 'I have to ship this game; it's got to come out soon. I don't want to miss summer.' 'People are waiting for the game,' basically, that's what I was thinking. 'I need to get it out soon.'"

Would making *Papers, Please* have been an easier process with more staff? Pope isn't so sure. "My personality… if I was managing people, I'd be a micromanager; I'd be a terrible manager, basically. The good thing about doing everything yourself is that if you get tired of one thing, you can do something else and you're still being productive. You're not stepping away completely; you're switching away to some other task. That was really useful during development.

"For *Papers, Please*, I was happy because I actually enjoyed playing the game. I liked the game almost from the beginning. Which is pretty much a requirement – I probably would have quit if I didn't like the game. But, yeah, I like to work. I can complain about it, but that's just me releasing the stress of actually making the game."

The success of *Papers, Please* has changed things for Pope in at least two ways. "I don't need to get a real job. I can keep working on these stupid indie games and I'm OK," he explains. But he's now terrified that people won't like whatever he does next as much as *Papers, Please*. "It was nice when I was just releasing games and nobody [knew] about them. Nobody cares, and you can do what you want."

Apart from all of the obscene user-submitted names that Pope unintentionally included in the final game, there's only one thing about the *Papers, Please* experience that seems to bug him at all. "When you read a review of the game, they almost always say that it's not fun. That's the first thing they say. And they put fun in quotes, too: it's not 'fun', in quotes. Which, I mean, I can understand. But for me, personally, I really want to make fun games that people are entertained by and they enjoy playing. So when people talk about the mechanics, or the tactility, which is something I worked hard to get right, then I really appreciate that. I mean, I love it when anybody says anything good about the game; honestly, it's really flattering for me. But particularly when people go against that feeling of 'It's not a fun game, but it's something you should play' – that's fairly satisfying.

"I think that's part of the narrative for 'empathy games'. The news narrative for empathy games is that it's important that they're not fun, I think, because it's kind of expressing a new interactive medium where you're not playing just to stomp on enemies' heads and get to the goal at the end. It's something different, so you have to define it differently from what came before: it's not like those games that are fun, it's like these new games that are not fun. As far as the news cycle goes, I understand why it has to be talked about like that. But just from a personal perspective, I'm trying to make games that are fun." ■



Lucas Pope
Designer, Papers, Please

When did you realise that the mechanics of *Papers, Please* could create empathy for the people who do this job in real life? When did you realise that you were making an 'empathy game'?
Not at first. Not till someone told me. Someone mentioned this new wave of 'empathy games' and they mentioned *Cart Life*, *I Get This Call Every Day* and *Papers, Please*. And I was like, "Empathy games, what?" I checked out both *Cart Life* and *I Get This Call Every Day* and I was like, "Yeah, shit, that's a lot like my game."

Will you continue to make games in this vein?
Well, I wouldn't say no. It's always about the game first. It's always about a piece of interactive entertainment. It's about which mechanics I think are good. I think whatever I do next, it's always going to be kind of in service of that; I'm not going to start from the position of 'I want people to feel empathy for this guy' or 'I want to get across this political point.' For me, I come very much from the side of 'I want to make it fun.' And I want to take it further than that, with a story or narrative or message, but if it's not fun to begin with then I'm not going to follow it up. It's hard to come from the empathy side or the message side and then to try and make a fun game out of that. It's harder than starting to make something fun and figuring out how to add a message to it.



The Truth of Arstotzka

Tuesday, November 23, 1982 — No Charge

Grestin Border Checkpoint Opens At Last!

After 6 Long Years, Can the Ministry of Admission Keep Us Safe?

Families To Reunite

Sports

The Weather



The Truth Of Arstotzka (above) harks back to Pope's *The Republica Times* and delivers key feedback. It reflects your choices about The Pink Vice dancers (below), for example



Lone worker

Papers, Please is the largest game Lucas Pope has yet made by himself. He's used to working with his wife, Keiko – the two had developed an easy process for designing and writing game systems together. Recently, Keiko's time has been occupied with the couple's new baby, and so Pope embarked on *Papers, Please* as a solo project. He's reasonably happy with how it worked out. "A lot of the fun for me in making a game is just figuring out how to do it: the puzzle of, like, 'OK, I'm just one guy. I can't do everything myself. It can't be 3D; it can't be doing crazy stuff. It's got to be something that one guy can handle.' Just figuring that out is something I enjoy." He plans to make his next game in much the same way – by himself, though it will be smaller in scope than *Papers, Please*. "[It will be] something completely different, not even related at all to *Papers, Please*," he tells us. "I don't know if people are going to be happy about that or not."



The game's chunky Fauvist art style ably communicates the bleakness at its core. Pope nearly abandoned the look, however

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Keeping an open mind

Write columns, blogs and articles like these for long enough and you'll often feel misunderstood. Whether talking about the highs and lows of using free-to-play economics, the question of whether games will ever be any good at telling stories (no, nay never), or any one of a dozen other topics, some people will misread you. They'll think you said something you didn't, or that you were going somewhere with an argument you weren't. They fill in imagined gaps and draw illusory connections. Most readers get your point, but they generally aren't the ones who comment. So the discourse can seem a bit lensed.

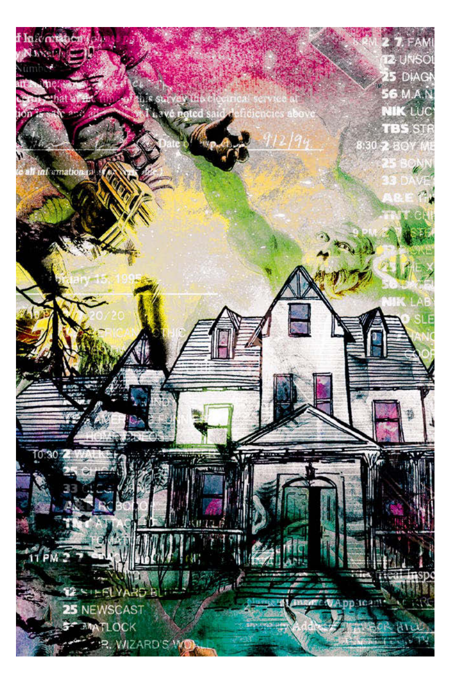
And if that's true for written work (believe me, it is) then it's doubly true for the games you make. Folks misunderstand them in all sorts of ways all across the spectrum. Take, for example, *Gone Home*. It's great. Play it. Don't worry so much about whether it's a game or not. Just play it. You'll probably like it if you give it a chance. You'll probably find it interesting for its length and that it leaves you pondering – if you let it. But will you?

Or will you be one of those people who immediately dismisses it as not-much-of-a or not-a-real game? Think about why you'd do that for a moment. Do games have a set shape in your mind, or is it more the case that you expect certain things from them? Is a firstperson game not a game to you without the shooting? Or is it more the subject matter that bothers?

I hope you're not one of those not-real types. That kind of close-mindedness makes the gaming community look like a bunch of dimwits. It makes us seem like those guys from Anvil: The Story Of Anvil, hanging on in there with their visions of a world built on heavy metal. It's fine and all, but it feels very out of time in a sad old dude way.

Conversely, are you one of those people who heard about *Gone Home* and its supposed significance to 'the evolution of videogames', and so judged it worthy before you ever played it? Because there's plenty of those people, too. They're the ones over-attributing significance where there is little.

Just as the functionalist's narrow-mindedness is a net negative, so too is the wavy-armed school of games, art and narrative critique. It's not so much



Just as a functionalist's narrow-mindedness is a net negative, so is the wavy-armed school of games and art critique

a critique as a theology, the belief that games and stories will some day mix well, despite the mountains of evidence showing that they do not.

Let's get back to *Gone Home*. Forget the backing track of the plot and so on for just a second. What is it you actually do? Trawl through a house looking for keys that open doors. Put another way, *Gone Home* is essentially a *Doom* level without the shotguns. Everything else is, mechanically speaking, icing sugar.

Pay attention to the setting, the culture and the ideas and what story is trying to come across and the gameness can seem weird. Why, asks the critic, must it still rely on the artifices of hunting and play? Why can't it be purer still, just an ambient exploration? Why must it be sullied by the vestiges of fun? Both positions are just link- or quote-bait. They're the sort of tagline that gets sidebarred in an article by a wily editor in search of emotion. But they're each ludicrously short-sighted in their own way.

Gone Home is one of those games that says a lot about the player rather than itself. It challenges them in a variety of subtle ways. It may not be the most mechanically dense game ever, but in the space left something interesting happens. The sense you are in that house searching somewhat urgently to find out what's going on starts to feel real. It's one of those games that crosses the barrier and for brief moments you find yourself believing. It's thaumatic. That word I invented.

"Why," a friend recently asked me, "are you always making words up? There's perfectly serviceable words there." To which my answer was essentially "No, there aren't." Just because we're used to the landscape being defined in a certain way doesn't mean that landscape is correct. Sometimes you're trying to move beyond, to express a quality in a way that doesn't match anything else you see. What else can you do?

Camps often form around easy dualisms because they appeal to our emotional judgement and reduce cognitive load. That has the adverse effect of leading to entrenched thinking, though. They say that when people with strong politics hear opinions that affirm or deny their stated opinions, their reason centres literally shut down. Think about that. (Or don't.)

Sometimes it's better to redefine how you challenge the reader. *Gone Home* is one such game, a challenge to the stated order of games as we supposedly know it. It stands somewhat and asks, 'What am I?'

Over time, the issue of being misunderstood usually fades. In part this is because thought refines and smooths. You learn to accommodate, to redefine from within (which is why sooner or later every game designer gets around to trying to define 'game'). But it's because of perseverance, too. Keep working at it, keep finding new ways to express what you think or feel, and the real meaning eventually starts to seep through.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

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CLINT HOCKING

Games about people – part two

Two issues ago, I lamented the fact that, aside from *The Sims*, there are no games about people. Since then, I've received a number of emails from players and developers pointing out that I was wrong.

While the primary point I was trying to make was that we have effectively left games about people by the wayside in our rush to develop ever more realistically simulated games about cars, guns or blocks, I admit I overstated the point. Specifically, I was wrong when I said: "I cannot name a single game that richly simulates dynamic interpersonal relationships and motivates AI characters to optimise the state of those relationships," because I can. In levelling criticism at our collective failure to effectively pursue these sorts of games, I unfairly neglected to mention several games that are developing this space.

Façade is, of course, the classic example. The game invites the player over for dinner with a couple of old friends who happen to be in the middle of a relationship crisis. By allowing the player to interact using (typed) natural language, the game offers a broad domain of interaction. This is its failure as well as its strength. While unbounded freeform communication with AI driven by dramatic goals turned out to be largely a mess, *Façade* is notable for having dared more of a leap forward in the games-about-people space than probably any game before or since.

Prom Week better constrains the interaction space by offering the player discrete choices and giving them directed goals to complete. By giving characters explicit personality traits, and by indicating the status of relationships between different characters using a set of meters and icons to communicate what is going on under the hood, *Prom Week* is more readable and more able to be played intentionally than *Façade*.

Versu is a text-based game in which players assume the roles of characters in dramatic scenes. By presenting the dynamically unfolding story to the player as narrative text, the game is able to give players objective information about the state of other characters without needless contrivance. This structure also allows the multifaceted nature of human social interactions to be revealed through narrative perspectives and subtext.



Façade is notable for having dared more of a leap forward in the games-about-people space than any game before

While these games are highly experimental, it's also worth pointing out that more conventional games have taken steps toward including human interactions as elements of their gameplay. *The Walking Dead* – while offering nowhere near the dynamism of *Versu* – is also a narrative game that allows players to make meaningful, consequential decisions about human relationships. And the *Mass Effect* series attempted to give players some meaningful agency in the way relationships develop over time, even though this exists in support of a traditional game about shooting.

Perhaps the most notable games that are centrally about people are multiplayer games. *The Friend Game* and *Sissyfight 2000* are two important examples. In the first, players are asked to use their empathic skills and their ability to see themselves from the perspective of others in order to predict how others will respond to personal questions. Doing well relies as much or more on honing cognitive skill as doing well in *Halo* relies on honing reflex skill. *Sissyfight 2000* invites us to use these uniquely human cognitive skills as weapons in a fictional conflict about creating and undermining social relationships and alliances. It reveals our terrible capacity for cruelty in a context that makes the exploration of this dark aspect of human nature safe and entertaining.

In the broadest sense, all multiplayer games are about people. Their nature is that – almost by definition – the richest components of the design are the elements that fill the negative space: the players themselves. The best multiplayer games use the authored elements of their design to focus gameplay around human skills and then constrain players to interact using these skills in contexts that put them under performance pressure.

The important difference between games centrally about human interpersonal interactions and games that are about reflexes, resource management or territory control is that the latter sorts of games can remain interesting when played against computers. Because computers are better than humans at all of these things, a computer can be tuned to provide a human with progressively more interesting challenges in these domains. Games that are centrally about human interpersonal interactions are generally not good when played against computers simply because computers are not good at performing (or simulating) these sorts of interactions.

Designing games that explicitly present a subjective view of human interactions rather than 'merely' illuminating more objective realities by spotlighting player behaviours is a noble goal. Some may argue that doing so requires first solving the hard-AI problem and is thus doomed. I think there's not enough evidence to make that assumption and that our so far laughably limited number of attempts to make games about people is something we should address before engaging in any discussion about what is or is not possible.

Clint Hocking is a game designer who lives in Seattle and works at Valve Software. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

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Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Pumping on your stereo

As I drift gently towards middle age, I often look back to a golden time when I was fondly nostalgic about things. And that's what we're starting with now. Way back in 2005, I worked on a game called *The Movies* for Lionhead. During its production, we came up with the idea for having a radio station to listen to while you played. This was our idea and was unique, and certainly was in no way like the *Grand Theft Auto* radio stations.

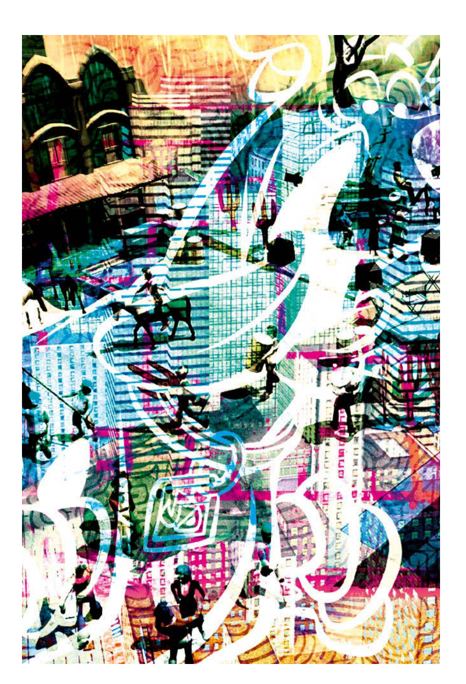
As always, the argument raged about whether the cost of it in terms of time to create, resources, disc space and real money was worth spending. Well, the argument didn't exactly rage, but there was some puffing of cheeks and a finger or two was jabbed at a whiteboard or two.

The feature survived and was included in the game. *The Movies* in-game timeline spanned seven distinct decades, and each had a DJ giving it some contemporary 'humorous' spiel. I won't describe it in much more detail – you have a copy of *The Movies* you almost certainly still play to death, so fire it up and hear for yourself.

The radio station rarely gave helpful advice to the player, and the game would have been just as playable without it, but the odd thing is, whenever people mention *The Movies* to me, it's one of the things, if not *the* thing, that they remember with most pleasure. Either this means the rest of the game wasn't up to much, or as my unquenchable ego chooses to believe, the radio was a high point in an exquisitely crafted game.

The reason people seem to remember it, and indeed like it, is because they were aware it was there just for fun. An ovoid gift presented to commemorate the state-sponsored execution of a Jewish man. Or Easter Egg, as I believe the kids call them. In games, everything is there for a reason, even red herrings, so we were lucky to be working in a genre into which such diverting nonsense fitted. And lucky our bosses said yes.

People, it turns out, like fun stuff in games, especially when they understand it's there just for fun. We were right not to seed the radio chatter with clues or power-ups. You just turn on the feature and, if it makes you smile, leave it running. Eventually, it starts to repeat and you turn it off, muttering that they should have recorded more.



People, it turns out, like fun stuff in games, especially when they understand it's been put there simply for the sake of fun

It seems that audiences are extremely happy to have the way they should approach features or scenes explained to them. Games – or TV shows, or whatever – that incorporate a character purely for light comic relief can get away with it with ease as long as the character achieves the level of mirth desired by the writers or producers. Take Scooby Doo. It's a serious show, exploring both man's inherent fear of the 'supernatural' – that which falls outside his practical experience of the world – and also delves in psychoanalytical detail into the mindset and motives (usually acquisitive) of those prepared to operate outside the law to achieve their aims. But when Scrappy Doo appears, it's universally acknowledged that everyone is in for a great time.

Not perhaps the perfect example in retrospect, but I've written it now, and the principle still stands. Another way of preparing people for exactly what to expect is music, background or otherwise. Films haven't really moved on from the days of jarring minor chords when the bad guy appears. It used to be a guy in the front pit on piano. Now it's John Williams. But we totally accept and embrace it as part of the emotional experience. It totally works. And games have yet to utilise this fully. Yes, of course they're not linear like films. Anyone who's read this column before is aware that this is pretty much the only point I make. But seeing as the quality of music in games has topped out at excellent (I'm thinking of you, *Portal*, and more recently you, the irritatingly named *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*), it's still not the omnipresent, perfectly subliminal accompaniment to the story. Opening and closing credits, cutscenes and moments of scripted danger are where this music lives. Don't believe me? Play a game and note what sort of music is being played, how loud, and where. Now watch a drama on film or TV. There'll be tons more, and it'll work effectively throughout. And unless you're noting it, you won't be aware of it.

Subtle music isn't just tunes. A single note; a tiny, quiet refrain; a little echo can prepare players as well as telling them 'This bit's important/moving/funny and not at all vital to the plot'. And it can elevate the writing no end. It's hard enough bringing game words to life when you're writing them in Excel, but knowing they'll be delivered in silence – or, worse, with music not tailored to the mood they're engendering – is tough.

Perhaps the writers should work more closely with the composers and audio teams. They don't in Hollywood, but that's because scripts are written and delivered before anything else starts. Either way, we should be subtle, but not sparing in our attempts to tell people how they should feel.

All this came about because I was surprised how easily folks accepted the bolted-on radio in *The Movies*. Oh, and the *real* reason they loved it was because two of the DJs were Clint Eastwood's son and Jamie Cullum. Meh.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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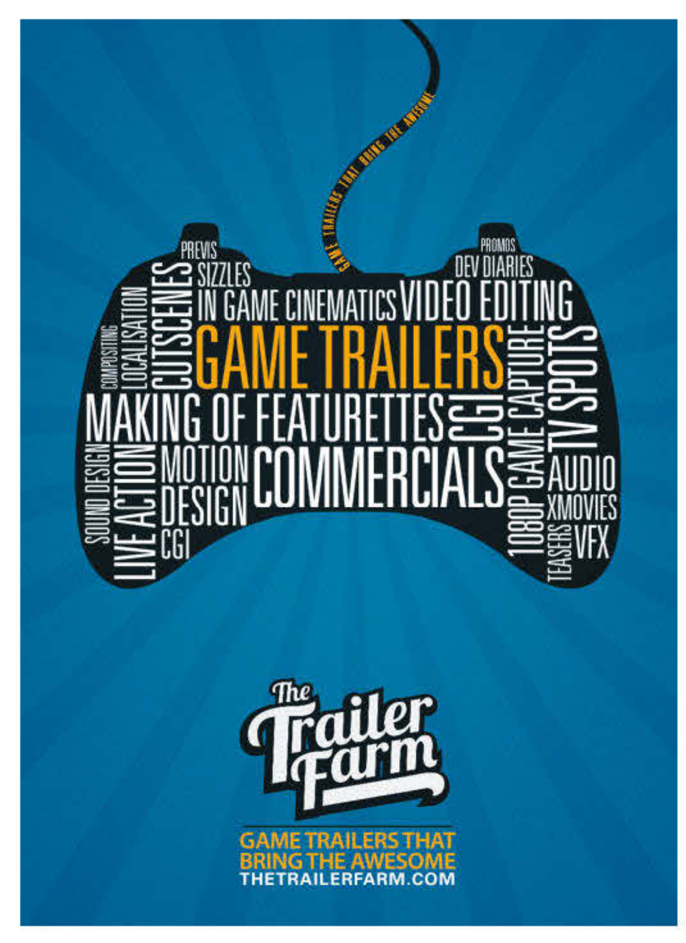


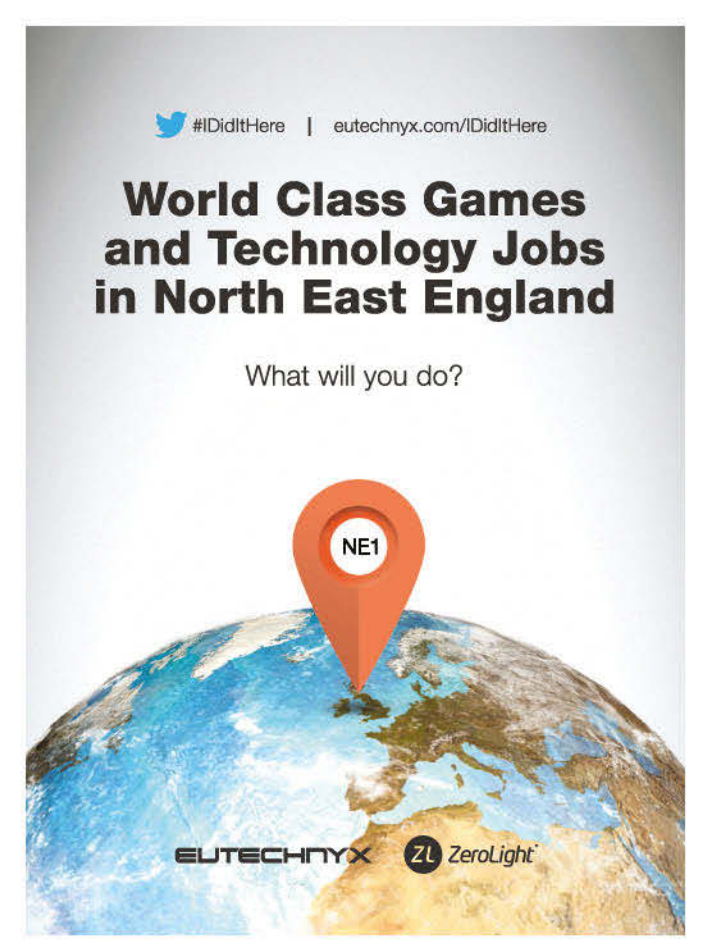


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